

IN THE SUN AND SHADOW, THE GREAT CLIFFS OF PETRA REVEAL ANCIENT ARTISTRY

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY MARIANNE SCOTT

At Petra enjoy the ancient carved cliffs and the colourful tourist scene, complete with camels.

ASI STROLL the three kilometres through the Siq, the slender cleft leading to Petra's dramatic sculptured interior, the nearly vertical cliffs stretch hundreds of metres above my head. I am awestruck. Nothing had prepared me for Petra — the name means “rock” in Greek — whose majestic contours have been carved by both nature and humans. Located in southern Jordan and part of the Great Rift Valley, this 6,000-kilometre geological trough begins in Syria and ends in Mozambique. The Jordan River and the Dead and Red Seas are part of the enormous valley.

To create Petra, earthquakes initially sundered the Earth's crust, while millions of years of sun, wind and water smoothed the rose-coloured sandstone into curved planes. As I run a fingernail across the gritty rock, grains of sand trickle down. The place feels alive — geology in action.

To arrive at Petra, we drive south through Israel, 370 kilometres from Tel Aviv to Eilat, on the Red Sea. We'd found an Israeli travel agency online and signed up for a private day tour. It is well organized. An Israeli collects us at 6:30 am from our Eilat hotel and hands us over to Ahmed, our lanky, 30-something Jordanian guide, who helps us cross the border from Eilat to Aqaba in Jordan. A well-appointed van transports

us 130 kilometres to the UNESCO Heritage site. Because of the Israeli-Jordanian peace treaty, travel between the two countries is fairly easy and Ahmed shepherds us through security line-ups.

We drive through villages filled with white, blocky dwellings topped by satellite dishes. The driver stops whenever we want: we see Bedouin camel drivers, goat herders and their rag-tag tents patched with black plastic that streams in the desert wind.

Along the way, Ahmed describes Petra's settlers. “About 2,500 years ago,” he says, “the Nabateans, a group of nomads, stopped roaming and used the numerous natural caves as burial sites. They also carved out a sophisticated city complete with waterworks, temples, a coliseum and gardens.” He adds proudly that Jordanians descend from these enterprising people, but skips the fact that the Saudis also claim them as ancestors.

The Nabateans controlled large territories and traded with the caravans transporting spices, silks, perfumes and sugar. They collected tolls and prospered. Their engineers learned to conserve and store water and built an ingenious system of dams and reservoirs.

When our little group enters Jordan's most prized tourist site, we meet today's entrepreneurs: men driving horse-drawn carts that whisk visitors to the city beyond the Siq, and others dressed in Nabatean battle dress, complete with visors, shields and vicious spears, who pose with tourists for a fee.

I walk to the ancient city's heart on a sunny spring day, well



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before the hot summer season: I want to feel the spirit of these intrepid colonizers, and the Ptolemies, Seleucids and Romans who came in waves to conquer them and steal their wealth. Did they marvel the way I did at the coral, salmon and rose hues that suffuse the stone? Or did constant battle inure them to the beauty?

“The area was naturally fortified,” explains Ahmed as we walk along the winding Siq. “But the Romans didn’t like any group to be too strong so they eventually conquered the Nabateans. Those stones paving the path? They were left by Romans.” He points at patches of well-worn, limestone cobbles. The wide cracks between make us hop from stone to stone.

Ahmed points out the huge Obelisk Tomb with its Greek, Egyptian and Nabatean-style elements. It was the first of many carvings around caves where Nabateans interred their dead. A series of sculptures depicts the bottom half of humans, their upper torsos washed away by wind and time. Their feet rest above the channel that once transported water — a precious resource in the desert. Nature has hewn some rocks into bizarre forms: one resembles a gigantic elephant; another is a dead ringer for Edvard Munch’s *Scream*.

The slim trench suddenly opens into a plaza and Petra’s best-known feature dwarfs us — the so-called Treasury, a 40-metre façade decorated with columns, pediments and an eagle, a Nabatean male deity symbol. As these ancient people left no written records, we can only guess what technologies they used to carve the sandstone.

Just beyond, chambers hollowed out high in the cliffs may have served as living quarters. Inside, two Muslim couples photograph each other, the women dressed in colourful hijabs and modest, black coats. The amphitheatre is the next colossal structure, sliced out of the rock, step by step. Tourists speaking a dozen languages mix with reclining camels, the occasional donkey, the fast-moving horse-drawn carts, and the “tourism police,” who keep an eye on us all.

As the sun begins to slide, we trek back to the van. The slanted light colours the rocks a deep tangerine; shadows created mysterious pockets of gloom. It is easy to see why the Nabateans chose this vast site to entomb their dead, to turn caves into living rooms and to celebrate their rituals. And to leave their artistic legacy for us to savour millennia after they disappeared. **VB**

To reach Eilat, we drove about five hours along the Dead Sea, which allowed a visit to Masada as well. Round-trip daily flights to Eilat are also available from Tel Aviv and take about an hour. The best time to visit is in spring and fall — summer temperatures can reach 40° C, while winters are chilly. With five people, our tour group, organized by Desert Eco Tours (desertecotours.com), cost \$300 per person, including visas, transport, entrance fees and lunch. Tips were extra. We were back at our hotel by 7:30 pm.



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