

CROSSING JORDAN

Part I: Petra to Amman

Petra

Think back to the third Indiana Jones movie about the Holy Grail. He's riding on horseback through an impossibly narrow canyon and all of a sudden he comes upon a spectacular building with Greco-Roman pillars protruding from the pink rock. That's the first building you come to in Petra.

Petra was carved into the walls of the narrow canyons (Wadis) of western Jordan by the mysterious Nabateans between 450 BCE and 100 CE. The particular canyon that is the starting point of our Petra adventure is 1.5 km long and not more than 25 feet wide – with natural rock formations showing off the full spectrum of red and pink sandstone coloring. And that's before you even get to “town”.

You would never know it from the scene in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, but there is a whole town here – with suburbs! Not only are there carved facades all along the walls of the Wadi, there is also a Roman amphitheatre that holds 5,000 people, as well as ornate tombs, obelisks, and a variety of decoration. But these structures were not exactly built: They were actually carved out of a solid stone wall, and it is only their extending features (freestanding columns, or the stage of the theater) that were built in the normal way. Inside, the buildings are undecorated, but you can still see chisel marks on the walls, and it dawns on you that the huge room you are in is actually part of the mountain. There is also a section of Petra with freestanding buildings (not carved into the rock at all) and those, too, are truly amazing – but more like the ruins in Greece and Turkey.

My companions and I climbed all over the place and at every turn I was awe-struck. Natural beauty accentuated by man-made structures, perfectly blended, made me feel as though Petra was always meant to be carved in stone. At one time, the carvings were clear and un-eroded, the buildings were pristine and Man and Nature were One. Even pictures don't do it justice, but these are some of the best I've found:

http://www.pbase.com/mansour_mouasher/petra)

After climbing and exploring for most of the day, I stood at the two highest points looking west over the Petra valley and the Jordan hills towards Israel, basking in the glow of a beautiful sunset and a dream fulfilled: It was a beautiful start to a strange trip.

I was traveling in Jordan in August 2004 with my friends Sasha and Clay. Both speak some Arabic and have studied Middle East politics and Arabic culture. Clay spent his summer in Cairo studying Arabic and being immersed in Arabic culture. Sasha spent his summer in Jerusalem studying Hebrew. They were good travel companions and I would travel with either one of them anywhere. The important thing here is that they are men and they speak some Arabic. In Jordan, as a woman, I'm just nice-looking property.

By Taxi from Petra to Amman.

Our driver, Abdullah, was a talkative guy who was willing to share his opinion on virtually everything, including the “joke” that he would happily kill either Sasha or Clay in order to own me. Along the way, he started a lively conversation about blood feuds and honor killings, announcing that his family had just gone through an ordeal in which the Sheikh (local tribal leader) had to intervene regarding a blood feud.

Blood feud, per Abdullah: If you kill someone – either accidentally or on purpose—it is only reasonable for his family to want to kill you. Whenever they see your face their blood will boil and they have to fight the urge to kill you. If their family allows the police to get involved, you would end up in jail for between 7 and 15 years. However, jail is no guarantee that the father or brother of the person you killed wouldn't come after you anyway. Now if the Sheikh gets involved, he acts as an intermediary. He talks to the other family and convinces them to lighten up. He sets conditions such as... if your family sees the dead person's family in the street, your family has to take a different road. In Abdullah's family's case, one of the conditions was to hold a huge barbeque for the whole town where 200 sheep or goats were slaughtered.

I accept that elsewhere in the world blood feuds are part of someone else's culture (including some backwater places in the US). However, I began to feel uncomfortable when the subject turned to honor killings. An honor killing is when a woman is killed in order to save the honor of her family. Baby out of wedlock? She's killed to save the honor of the family. Raped? She's killed to save the honor of the family. Abdullah noted that while it didn't happen so much anymore, it did happen. Because who would want a sister who was disgraced or who disgraced the family? Who would want a dishonorable woman?

Abdullah's descriptions were a bit confusing because he said that Arab culture respects woman and society will believe whatever the woman says. But then he looked at me in the rearview mirror and said, “but everyone knows women usually lie.”

I'll also mention that on this 3-hour trip, he told me that if I was going to cross the border back into Israel alone I had better cover myself up very modestly. Then he told Sasha and Clay to tell the taxi driver (who would eventually take me to the border crossing) in Arabic, “Treat her like your own sister.” Apparently, a man can do anything to **your** sister, but he will respect his **own** sister.

Hmm, comforting thoughts upon entering Amman at midnight.

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Next... Part II: Amman Adventures by Night and Day