



Pink oleander flowers soak in the sun outside the Monastery in Petra. While the ruins are a highlight in Jordan, the entire country is steeped in history. — SUZANNE MORPHET

'Vast, echoing and God-like'

Jordan has a touch of adventure, centuries of history and beauty at every turn

Suzanne Morphet

The cool water that was ankle deep half a kilometre back now pushes against the bottom of my life-jacket.

The canyon we're hiking up has narrowed, the current has grown stronger and the boulders are bigger. Up ahead, the thunder of waterfalls reverberates off the high sandstone walls.

We're deep inside the spectacular slot canyon of Wadi Mujib, one of Jordan's nine protected nature reserves. Shafts of sunlight reach down to illuminate layers of rock compressed over millennia.

We stop repeatedly to gaze up as the walls converge overhead in a swirl of sensuous shapes and colours.

Adventure tourism is taking off in Jordan spurred in part by the newly completed Jordan Trail, a 650-kilometre hiking route that stretches from the Roman ruins near Umm Qais in the country's north to the blue waters of the Red Sea in the south.

"People think once they've seen Petra, they've seen everything," sighs Carmen Scholten, the owner of In2Jordan, a tour operator that offers customized itineraries that can include — but go well beyond — the ancient Nabataean city that is Jordan's greatest attraction.

We begin near Madaba, known as the city of mosaics for its centuries-old stone art. It's an odd choice perhaps for an adventure-seeking group, but driving to the top of

Mount Nebo orients us to Jordan's biblical landscape.

We see Israel in the hazy distance, beyond the Dead Sea, shimmering in the heat.

We learn that Jesus was baptized on this side of the Jordan River, and that Moses climbed this very mountain after wandering in the desert for 40 years.

Steeped in history, we hit the road. By evening we're in Wadi Rum, a desert valley in southern Jordan that T.E. Lawrence, the inspiration for Lawrence of Arabia, described as "vast, echoing and God-like."

The UNESCO World Heritage Site is studded with mountains that morph from beige to burnt orange to rosy red. Rock walls bear inscrip-

tions and petroglyphs from 12,000 years of human occupation.

Riding a camel over sand dunes at sunset feels like a Middle Eastern tourist cliché, but these dromedaries and their Bedouin owners are for real. When one cantankerous animal lies on its back, kicks his feet in the air and bellows his discontent, it's like watching a toddler throw a temper tantrum.

"They are comfortable, but you really have to relax into them," says Gail, our English-speaking guide.

With a lurch and a heave, my ship of the desert, as they are known, rises under me, back legs first. When he's fully standing, I realize it's no wonder camels often seem disdainful of people. From this great height,

they can only look down on us. The next day we explore a tiny patch of Wadi Rum on foot.

At 8 a.m. the heat already feels intense. We stop to rest at a Bedouin camp where a smiling young man in a white ankle-length thobe and headdress offers us sweet tea flavoured with cardamom, sage and cinnamon.

Later, we follow a herd of goats deeper into the desert, where they graze on shrubs and thorny bushes.

When we turn off into an open valley, I feel the wonderful emptiness that Lawrence described so poetically.

There's no one else in sight and no sound but the echo of a bark from a dog goat-herding in the distance.