

Back on the road, I'm looking forward to cooling off in the intensely blue water of the Red Sea at Aqaba, Jordan's only port city.

Wedged between Israel and Saudi Arabia, and within sight of Egypt, Jordan's 25-kilometre stretch of beachfront is known for its spectacular fringing reef.

The coral is as colourful as a flower garden in spring and so close to the surface that in places we can't swim over it, only around it.

Heading north again, we veer off the main highway and follow an old trade route known as the King's Highway.

It takes us up steep inclines with big views over the Great Rift Valley. We're en route to Petra, one of the new seven wonders of the world.

The next day we're up before the sun to enter this popular attraction before everyone else.

The narrow entry Siq, with its curvaceous red walls, is empty and it's easy to imagine traders once riding through here on camels laden with spices from India, incense from Arabia and silk from China.

Carved into the sandstone rock, Petra's vast complex of tombs and

temples are magnificently preserved, despite erosion from rain and windblown sand. Even the Nabataean channels continue to divert water during flash floods.

After climbing 800 steps to the carved facade known as the Monastery — which is more impressive than the famous Treasury — we leave Petra by the back door, on a path that connects to the Jordan Trail.

"It's a highway now" deploras one of our local guides, which makes me laugh because — despite the recent widening of the trail for tourists — we still encounter some narrow sections with steep drop-offs, one of which has a woman in our group literally clinging to the rocky side.

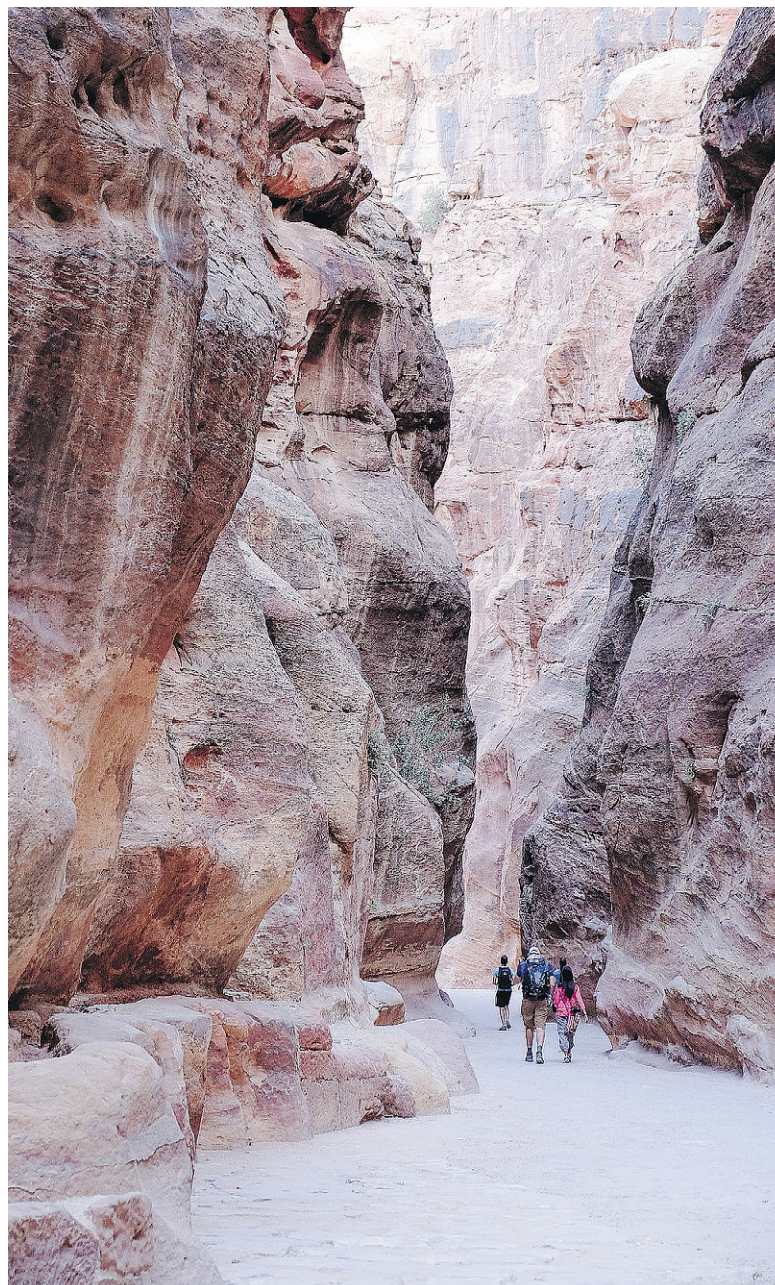
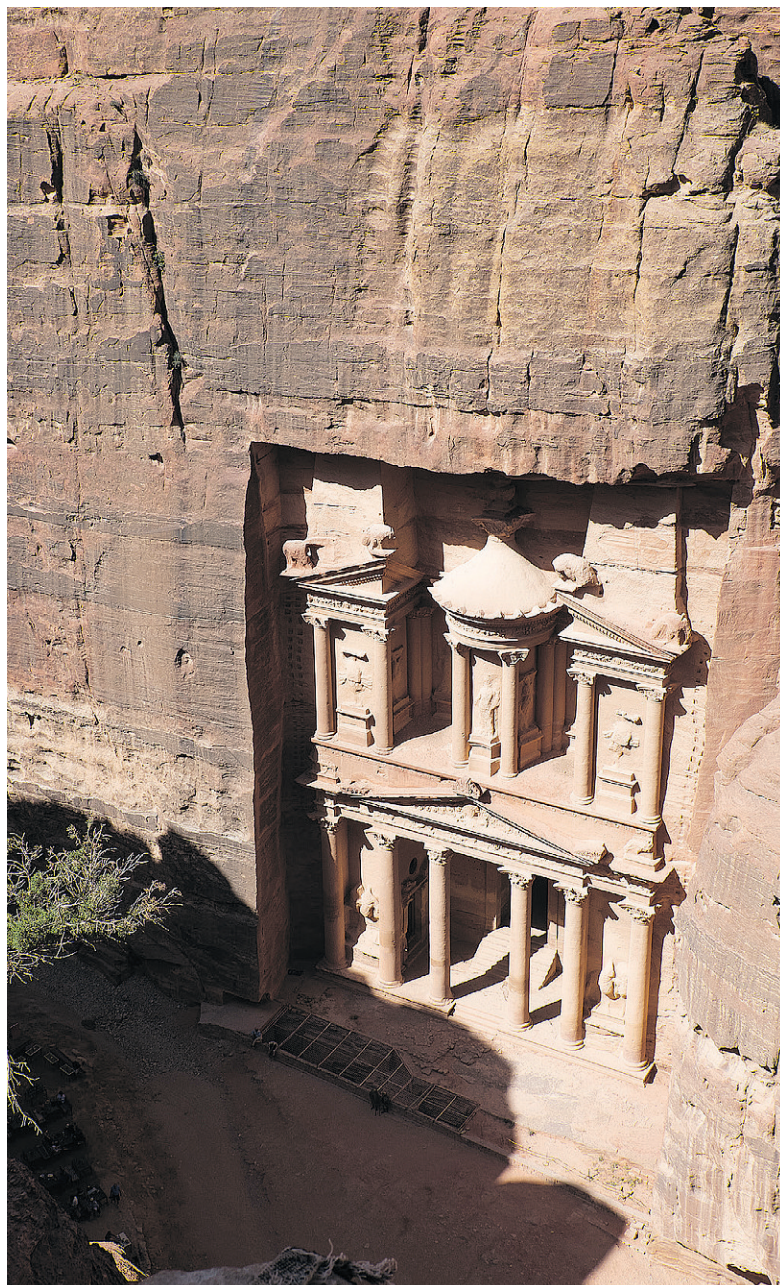
The views keep us in awe most of the way to Little Petra, where we sleep soundly that night in woven goat-hair tents at another Bedouin camp.

Our tour ends at the Dead Sea, just down the road from the waterfalls of Wadi Mujib. Wrapped in mud — a signature spa treatment here — I ponder all we've seen and done.

*The writer was a guest of the Jordan Tourism Board. It did not review or approve this story.*



Sure-footed donkeys can help a tourist find their way around in Petra. — PHOTOS: SUZANNE MORPHET



Petra is a must-see for any visitor to Jordan, from the imposing Treasury, at left, to the yawning Siq, at right.

## If you go

- ▶ Royal Jordanian Airways offers twice-weekly direct flights from Montreal to Amman. Visit [rj.com](http://rj.com)
- ▶ In2Jordan offers customized itineraries for groups or individuals.
- ▶ For snorkelling and diving in Aqaba, Sea Guard has three boats for day excursions. Owner Yazan Alsaad is a PADI-certified open-water dive instructor as well as a charming host. Prices start at \$75, including lunch.
- ▶ The Jordan Valley Marriott has one of the biggest spas in the country, including an indoor Dead Sea water pool if you'd rather not go to the beach. (Because the Dead Sea is receding by about one metre per year, the beach is now a 10- to 15-minute walk from hotel rooms.)