

# In the steps of Lawrence

Nick Bateman finds Jordan is great fun (and, no, we're not talking about a new celebrity love match)

**R**emember that great scene in the movie epic *Lawrence of Arabia* when our hero, atop camel, rides through the mountain pass, singing and shouting at the echo? Well I've just done that too. It might have been atop a Landcruiser but it still stirred memories of that wonderful moment.

The spot is the Wadi Rum and it's in Jordan, one of the most hospitable and comfortable of Middle East countries. Certainly I felt safe throughout my own personal epic journey. Lawrence marched through the Wadi Rum before liberating Aqaba from the Turks during the Arab Revolt in 1917. It is an awesome area of red sand and breathtaking mountains, hidden rivers and steep ravines. I spent the day with a Bedouin in his four-wheel drive, although if you insist on sticking your head in the sand you can still find treks on camel, horse and donkey. It's a good place to spend a couple of days. Sleep in the desert under canvas and marvel as the colour changes as the sun moves across the vast sky. Climb the rocks, sit on river banks and just enjoy being there.

I'd started my journey in the Jordanian resort of Aqaba (a five-hour flight from London), sitting on the Red Sea opposite Sinai and Eilat. Here you can relax and laze in the sun, or do something more energetic. The diving is superb and even simply snorkelling is fantastic with coral reefs and brightly-coloured fish in abundance.

Aqaba is a tax-free zone that attracts crowds from neighbouring Saudi Arabia and Iraq – and is currently attracting much new development, turning it into a top international resort. Yet it is less than two hours via the desert highway to the history of the Wadi Rum.

Leaving this area behind I made the hour-long journey to the ancient city of Petra, starting early to miss at least some of the crowds. After entering through the visitors centre there are three longish walks – about a mile – down the hill into the city itself. I chose the most popular, the Siq. Here, in the hot sun, locals try to persuade you to

take the weight off your feet with a ride on a buggy, camel, horse or ass. But, unless you really are struggling, it's much more interesting on foot. The buggy drivers are very polite and swiftly take no for an answer.

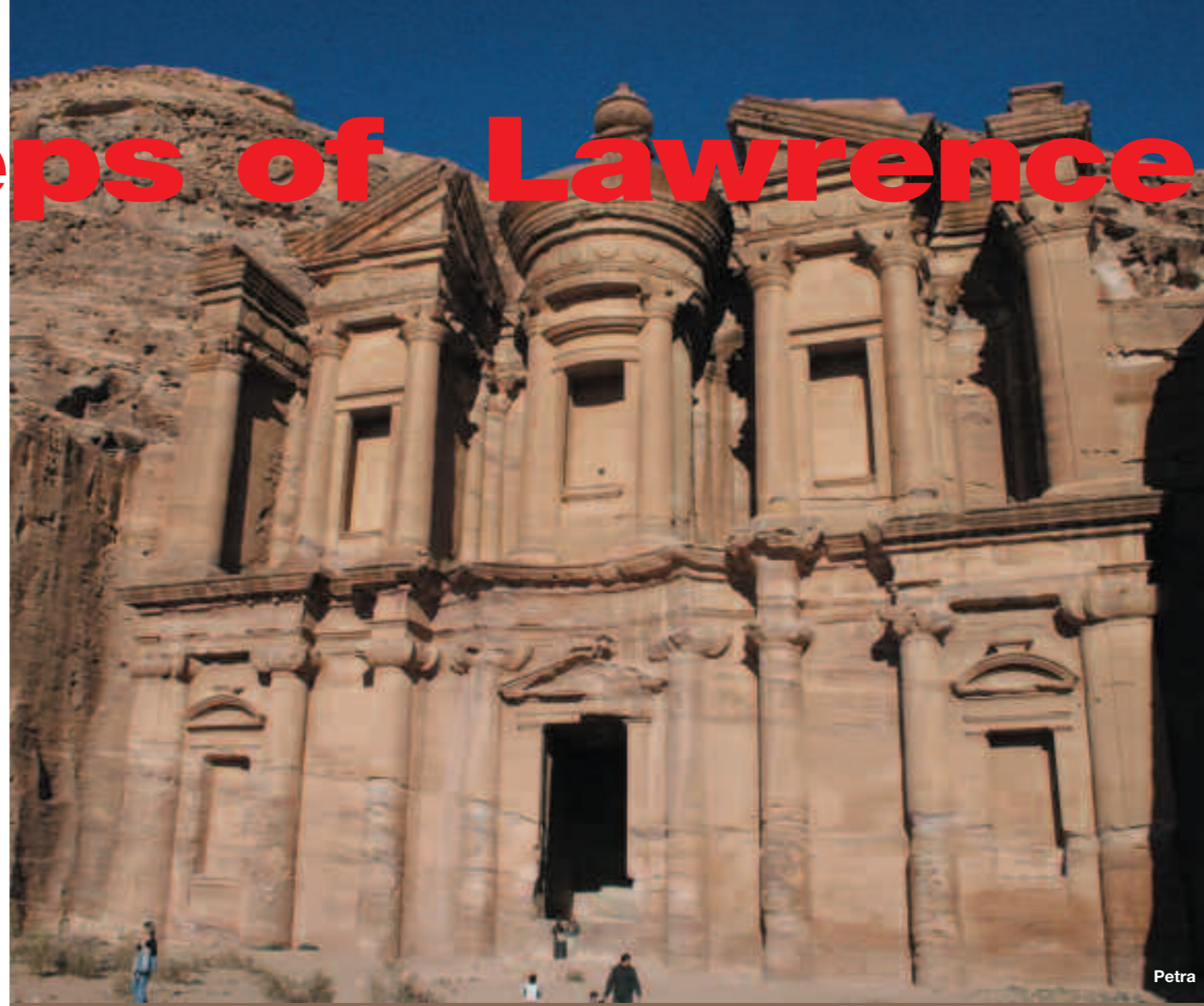
As you stroll by the rocky ravine the striking red rocks give way to the incredible site of the Treasury, carved from the very rock face 2,000 years ago. So cleverly is it hidden from the rain and the wind that it remains largely intact.

I also walked to the Place of Sacrifice, the Royal Tombs and made the 900-step climb to the Monastery. The views are worth the slog. I spent the next few hours touring other tombs scattered around the site and was exhausted by the end of the day when Petra looks magical by candlelight.

Still, though, my journey wasn't over. I drove to Madaba to view the Byzantine mosaic map which dates back to the 6th century and is now housed in the modern day church of St George.

I also made the short journey north to Mount Nebo, where Moses first saw the Promised Land, and where he is said to have died. Having gazed down at what Moses glimpsed, I can understand how he felt.

Jordan also has another history, a Roman one. The empire marched



Petra



A Jordanian bedouin guard

through here and the city of Jerash is as perfect example of the times as you'll get. The temple of Artemis, the Cardo, Oval Plaza, the North Theatre, and Baths are all in good order.

I spent a couple of hours admiring the site before heading back to the seaside, although for more history before I got down to sunbathing. The point where the Dead Sea meets the River Jordan is where St. John baptised Jesus. The river is no longer powerful, resembling a drainage ditch in colour as well as flow. Also within the site is Elijah's Hill and St John the Baptist Church.

I was looking forward to the Dead Sea and as I descended to what is the lowest point on earth my ears popped. A huge mist had enveloped the sea, making it look like a fog, but this is the water evaporating at an alarming rate. You can't swim here, you bob because of the high salt content. It takes some getting used to, rather unsettling at first but an experience you'll never forget. And sunset, a fiery orange and red, is a perfect end to your day.

Jordan has lot to offer... the uplifting biblical sites, the beauty of the desert and the fun of the resorts. Whether you travel in a group, or hire a car and a modestly-priced guide, the mix of experiences is magical. Lawrence of Arabia had a lot to shout about... ■



Jerash



## Fact file

◆ Voyages Jules Verne ([www.vjv.co.uk](http://www.vjv.co.uk), 0845 166 7003) offers 13 itineraries in Jordan starting at £415 for 7 nights.