



TRAVELLERS' TALES,  
FROM NEAR + FAR

# EXPERIENCES

Clockwise from top: Known as Ad Deir, the Monastery is one of Petra's largest and most iconic monuments; along the Jordan Trail between Dana and Petra, panoramic views of sandstone valleys and arid gorges unfold dramatically at every turn; the landscape is strewn with massive boulders and geological formations shaped over millions of years, some precariously perched as if placed by design.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: JORDAN TRAIL ASSOCIATION; EXPERIENCE JORDAN ADVENTURES (2)

WANDER

## Passage To Petra

On her second visit to Jordan, **Chaitali Patel** revels in the magic of the country's spellbinding landscapes and extraordinary historical treasures

THE FIRST TIME I laid eyes on the **Treasury** ([pdc.pdtra.gov.jo](http://pdc.pdtra.gov.jo)), the most famous of **Petra's** ([visitpetra.jo](http://visitpetra.jo)) ancient buildings, was through an opening in a wind-smoothed canyon known as the Siq. Walking through the serpentine passage, just over a kilometre long, flanked by walls layered in red and pink stone, the sight of the Treasury was eagerly awaited—and it certainly lived up to the hype. Built by the Nabataeans almost 2,300 years ago, the Treasury is part of a vast collection of monuments across the region, each telling the story of the land and its ancient people.

On my second visit to Jordan, I joined a group trek from the **Dana Biosphere Reserve** ([rscn.org.jo/reserve/1](http://rscn.org.jo/reserve/1)) to Petra—led by **Experience Jordan Adventures** ([experiencejordan.com](http://experiencejordan.com)), a local operator offering curated treks. We covered 85 kilometres over five days, reaching the Treasury via a lesser-known backdoor entrance.

### Getting Started

"Don't worry, you'll be fine," reassured our group leader Lama Hamdan, sensing my nerves about the challenging hike. Our diverse group of eight set off for different reasons; for me, beyond admiring archaeological treasures, it was to explore Jordan's mysterious landscapes carved by the elements. Walking ancient Bedouin paths through rugged mountains seemed the perfect way to do so. The 675-kilometre **Jordan Trail** ([jordantrail.org](http://jordantrail.org)) was created to help visitors explore remote corners of the country, taking about 40 days to cross from Umm Qais in the north to Aqaba on the Red Sea.

Our starting point, the **Dana Biosphere Reserve** ([rscn.org.jo/reserve/1](http://rscn.org.jo/reserve/1)), spans over 300 square kilometres and covers four biogeographical zones rich in flora and fauna. Early on, we walked beneath widely spaced oak and juniper trees to a shaded lunch spot beside enormous boulders. As we rested, our Bedouin guide Audeh lit a small fire and brewed black tea—a welcome ritual even on hot days. His friendly donkey, Marzouka, served as our group mascot, lugging extra water, the treasured kettle, and supplies for our tea.

For a country heavily reliant on tourism, the Jordan Trail helps spread economic benefits more widely by creating jobs for people living along the route, hiring them as guides and support staff. Audeh, who hails from a village near Dana, greatly enriched our experience with his stories and deep indigenous knowledge, offered in modest English, yet coloured with wisdom.





▲ From flat terrain, scree-covered slopes, swathes of sandstone, to precariously placed boulders, the stretch between Dana and Petra is a constantly changing canvas. *Right:* Audeh is from a village close to the Dana Biosphere Reserve and works as a local guide on the Jordan Trail.

### Scaling Heights

At times, when putting one foot in front of the other felt unbearable, I found solace in the anticipation of what lay ahead. Leaving the tree-lined slopes behind, we descended a steep, scree-covered ridge to a bone-dry *wadi*, or riverbed, arriving at our campsite beside a farm growing tomatoes and aubergines. Our support team had already set up our tents and prepared a feast of fresh salads, hummus, bread, chicken, and vegetable curry. I'm not sure if it was the fatigue or the relief of having survived day one, but everything tasted even better as we dined in the fading light, sharing tales from distant lands.

The next day, the scenery transformed dramatically. The farms we left behind were the only patches of green we'd see for the remainder of the day, as barren mountains surrounded us. As we paused to catch our breath, Audeh, with his trained eye, brushed fine sand from a rock surface to reveal shards of quartz glimmering in the sun. Further along, he picked out fossilised shells—a tell-tale sign that the mountain we stood upon was once the ocean floor. To an outsider, the harsh surroundings might appear desolate, but the Bedouins who call it home know its hidden secrets.

As we climbed higher, the Wadi Araba came into view. In the haze of the afternoon sun, the vast expanse looked deserted; yet that evening, as darkness fell, pinpricks of light flickered to life in the distance, revealing a small city beyond the mountains. Jordan, surrounded by some of the most geopolitically sensitive regions in the world, remains a rare pocket of peace. While this introduces a degree of unpredictability, the people continue to welcome travellers with their trademark warmth and hospitality.

◀ From left: Despite its name, the Treasury (Al Khazna) was not used to store treasure, but is believed to be a grand Nabataean tomb dating back to the 1st century CE; tents pitched in the middle of the wilderness offer unmatched access to Jordan's rugged landscapes.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: JORDAN TRAIL ASSOCIATION; CHAITALI PATEL (2); JORDAN TRAIL ASSOCIATION

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From left: Dating to the 6th century CE, the church in Petra contains remarkably preserved floor mosaics depicting local flora, fauna, and mythological figures—a rare glimpse into the artistic sensibilities of the time; shards of pale limestone litter the trail, their jagged edges glinting; in spring, the desert briefly transforms as poppies and other wildflowers bloom unexpectedly between the rocks, adding ephemeral beauty to the arid terrain.

### GETTING THERE

**Emirates** ([emirates.com](https://emirates.com)), **Etihad Airways** ([etihad.com](https://etihad.com)), and **Qatar Airways** ([qatarairways.com](https://qatarairways.com)) operate flights to Amman from major Indian cities via Dubai, Abu Dhabi, or Doha. Guided hikes include pick-up from Amman, taking you to the trail's starting point.

### VISA

Indian passport holders can get a visa on arrival or save on entry fees with the **Jordan Pass** ([jordanpass.jo](https://jordanpass.jo)), which covers tourist visas and access to sites like Petra and Wadi Rum.

### STAY

**Amman Marriott Hotel** is an excellent base for exploring the city, offering plush, modern rooms. *Doubles from ₹15,000;* [marriott.com](https://marriott.com)

**Toledo Amman**, located in a quiet neighbourhood, is a great budget option with comfortable rooms. *Doubles from ₹8,000;* [toledoammanhotelamman.com](https://toledoammanhotelamman.com)

CHAITALI PATEL (3)

### Taming the Elements

"Today is the hardest day—but the most rewarding," beamed Hamdan as we prepared to leave the campsite at Furon. We covered 17 kilometres on day three, traversing some of the wildest corners of Jordan. Clambering up the Sharah Mountains along ancient Bedouin shepherd paths, I drank in the spirit-lifting views—my reward for every painful step. At times, we walked along narrow ridges skirting precipitous drops, scrambled over smooth boulders, and traversed swathes of sandstone streaked with hidden mineral deposits. This soft rock is what the Nabataeans used to carve entire cities.

Given Jordan's strategic location, traders and caravans once travelled through from north to south on their way to the Red Sea coast, and from east to west to reach the Mediterranean. At the intersection of these routes, the Nabataeans built rest stops for traders who had journeyed for months through unforgiving desert, carrying precious cargo such as silks from China, spices from India, and myrrh—transforming Petra into a thriving nexus of commerce and culture. None of this, however, would have been possible without water. Relying on their deep understanding of the land and its climate, the Nabataeans constructed a series of aqueducts to collect precious rainwater.

### Through Time and Stone

On day four, a herd of goats led us through a narrow crevice in the mountainside to see the remains of an ancient dam and aqueduct. Hamdan told us there are several scattered around the periphery

of the ancient city of Petra—quiet traces of the sophisticated civilisation that once passed through these lands.

Long before the caravans reached the coast, deals were struck in the small meeting rooms carved into the walls of Little Petra, or Al Beidha—a suburb of the larger city of Petra. In some of these rooms, a few precious patches of fresco remain, offering a glimpse of the city's former grandeur and the wealth of the Nabataeans.

We saw more of this at the imposing Monastery, or Ad Deir, hand-carved with unbelievable symmetry and precision into a towering cliff. Then we descended 900 rock-hewn steps to the sprawling centre of the complex, teeming with archaeological treasures that would take days to explore. Passing the impressive Great Temple, a Byzantine Church, a colonnaded street, and a theatre with a seating capacity of 4,000, we finally reached the Treasury—or Al Khazna, Petra's pièce de résistance—from the back.

No matter how many times one sees the rose-hued Treasury, with its Egyptian, Greek, Roman, and Nabataean elements, it remains an arresting sight. With little written historical evidence, much about Petra remains hidden and unknown, only adding to its allure. As we exited the complex through the Siq, I turned around, searing the sight into my memory. We may never unlock all the secrets buried in Jordan's wind-chiselled ruins—but perhaps it's enough to have walked among them, to have felt their quiet endurance, and to carry their stillness long after leaving. 🌍