

# The sands of time

A hidden city, a waterfall at shower temperature and the lowest point on the planet—all highlights of Clive Aslet's trip to Jordan

**T**ERRIBLY chuffed to meet you, I'm sure,' announced Ahmed, our Bedouin guide. We were in Petra, walking down the narrow gully that is the Siq, while dodging the pony traps being driven at a rattling pace by other tribesmen (you have to be a native of Petra to work there). I looked after the one that contained my wife, wondering if it wouldn't have been worth risking her footwear on the ancient paving stones after all.

Ahmed has never been outside Jordan, but has a quick ear and a passion for satellite television. His eyes, underscored by a line of kohl, the traditional Bedouin cosmetic thought to protect against the sun's glare, glittered. 'Lovely jubbly,' he said.

Our knowledge of Ahmed's country had been, by contrast, somewhat limited before going there. 'Jordan's outside the Holy Land,' observed our eight-year-old son Charlie, looking at a globe one breakfast time. It would not be safe for me to reveal which family member replied: 'What's she doing there?' But after a night at Wadhi Rum—'rustic' is the rather euphemistic term that tour operators use to describe the conditions—we felt we could have looked T. E. Lawrence in the eye.

Dawn is the time to experience this landscape of parched, yet seemingly weeping rocks, their surface carved into filigree by sandstorms—and for once I had no difficulty in rising at that hour, given the Spartan comforts of the bed. We had what the boys called a *Sea of Sand* moment, recalling the 1958 film about the Desert Rats that, courtesy of a national newspaper, we had watched before coming out. Climbing the sand dunes, we kept an eye open in case a speck in the immensity of

Mark Abouzeid

**Tourism isn't highly developed in Jordan, so if you're jostled, it'll be by a camel**







At 1,300ft below sea level, the Dead Sea—really a giant lake—is the lowest place on Earth—its mud boasts rejuvenating properties

the valley was really one of the Afrika Corps's half-tracks, appearing from behind a round-shouldered mountain. Lawrence of Arabia was filmed here.

Ryan Rodrick Beiler/Alamy; Mark Aboutzeid

The drive back to our hotel at Ma'in Hot Springs, along the one road that might be considered a motorway in Jordan, was long and dusty. But this only served to heighten our enjoyment of the great natural phenomenon beside which the Evason is set. This is a waterfall, gushing in an unceasing, mineral-enriched cascade down a cliff face and into a river that helps feed the Dead Sea. King Herod slithered over the riverbed, as we did, to sit under it. Or perhaps, if he had sensitive feet, he chose to be carried

across: the river water is hotter than you would run a bath. Having begun its journey in the snowy mountains of Iran, it seeps through underground fissures until meeting the earth's magma in this formerly volcanic region. Superheated, it then bubbles up as springs. The water emerging at the top of the cliff loses temperature as it descends the waterfall; it's warm, not scalding, by the time it reaches your head and shoulders.

As part of the Six Senses group, the Evason is serious about ecology. You can trek along the *wadhi* before breakfast, or, less strenuously, enjoy the sunset over the Dead Sea, with the lights of Jerusalem twinkling in the distance, from a 'panoramic

complex' that includes an Arabic restaurant. There is a library for further reading. Do not imagine that the architecture is as beguiling as the same company's Zighy Bay in Oman: the hotel itself, built 30 years ago, has defied the best attempts to soften its rectangularity.

On the other hand, I can't remember a happier family meal than our private barbecue, served on the eighth-floor terrace overlooking the waterfall. The oxygen may have had something to do with it. At more than 820ft below sea level, Ma'in benefits from the reverse of the thinning atmosphere encountered by mountaineers. Oxygen levels increase as you go



down; they boost the system. You sleep well at night.

The Dead Sea itself is lower still; in fact, at 1,300ft below sea level, it is the lowest point on the planet (remember, if you're puzzled, the Dead Sea is really a large lake). We enjoyed it from the marble splendours of the Kempinski Ishtar, an architectural tribute to the Hanging Gardens of Babylon that would have appealed to Cecil B. de Mille. There are no fewer than nine swimming pools. No visit is complete without smearing face and body with the black, volcanic mud from the bottom of the Dead Sea, which certainly has transforming properties, if not rejuvenating ones. ('I can personally attest to its improving the sex drive,' claimed one of its advocates.) It's a

## The Bedu Heritage Project

The nomadic Bedu, whose territory covers the Arabian deserts of the Middle East, from Syria to Yemen and from Israel to Iraq, represent one of the oldest indigenous peoples on the planet. They number almost five million, but today barely 10% still lives in the traditional way: as nomadic camel-herders whose lives and traditions revolve around their animals and the desert landscape of which they have been a part for millennia.

As with many ancient cultures, the lure of a modern existence and, more recently, the destructive forces of global tourism, threaten their way of life and the cultural heritage passed down from generation to generation. The Bedouin Heritage Project, launched in 2008 by Mark Abouzeid—in his own words, 'a Lebanese man raised in the US who knew little about his own culture'—following a visit to the Bedu of the UNESCO-protected area of the Wadi Rum in Jordan, is a unique project that aims to record and safeguard the ancient knowledge and culture of these ancient people before it's lost forever.

Run by a small team, which includes a number of local Bedu, the aim is to form a 'living library', comprising photographs, interviews and recordings. In this way, a kind of multimedia time capsule will be created for the future, and, in the present, it is hoped that the project will raise awareness among the Bedu people of the rich heritage they still possess.

'There is so much knowledge bound up in Bedu oral traditions,' explains Mr



Abouzeid. 'The Bedu of Petra and Wadi Rum, Jordan, for example, have preserved specific knowledge related to the flora and fauna of the area, traditional medicine, camel husbandry, craftsmanship, and tracking and climbing skills. As well as wanting to preserve this heritage, there is also so much the modern world could learn from ancient knowledge distilled through the generations.'

If the team's work is successful, it is hoped that the Bedouin Heritage Project will provide a template for similar work to safeguard the heritage of other ancient cultures on the cusp of globalisation. For more information, and to find out how you can support the Bedouin Heritage Project, visit [www.bedouinheritage.org](http://www.bedouinheritage.org)  
*Susannah Glynn*

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## 'No visit is complete without smearing face and body with the black mud from the Dead Sea'

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measure of the place that the Kempinski mud, which guests scoop out of terracotta pots, has been processed and perfumed, to make it more acceptable to the nose; in its raw state, it's sulphurous. A bob in the Dead Sea will, thank goodness, wash it off.

Jordan isn't a cheap destination, but it is, as yet, a relatively undiscovered one. A quarter of an hour's drive from the Kempinski is the site of Christ's baptism in the River Jordan. It was from the top of Mount Nebo that Moses looked out and proclaimed the Promised Land. Madaba, a largely Christian town famous for its

mosaics, contains a sixth-century map of the Holy Land in a mosaic floor. The Roman remains at Jerash—colonnades, triumphal arch, nymphaeum, theatre—are spectacular. Tourism isn't highly developed; if you're jostled, it will be by a camel. Besides, due to industry and irrigation, the level of the Dead Sea is falling by 3ft every year. This could be the time to go. 🐪

### Travel Information

● *Stay four nights in the Evason Ma'in Hot Springs & Six Senses in two Superior Rooms (twin beds) on a B&B basis and three nights at the Kempinski Hotel Ishtar Dead Sea in two Superior Rooms (Main Building Double) from £1,225 per adult and from £1,020 per child. Price is based on two adults and two children sharing accommodation, economy flights from London Heathrow with Bmi including private car transfers (based on May 15, 2010 departure). Contact Elegant Resorts Reservations on 01244 897515 or visit [www.elegantresorts.co.uk](http://www.elegantresorts.co.uk)*