



Margie Goldsmith

As we hiked along the path, a Bedouin family came out to offer us tea.

Finding the Way in Jordan

The real journey was there all along

By Margie Goldsmith

Natalie and I had just started up the trail towards Mt. Aaron, the highest peak in Petra, Jordan, when a ruddy-skinned man wearing the traditional checkered *Kefiyah* headscarf rode up alongside on a donkey, pulling a second donkey behind him.

"Marhaba," I said. "Hello."

He smiled and answered something back in Arabic.

"Sorry," I said, "I only know one word."

He pointed up the mountain. "You go up?" We nodded.

"I take you. Get on donkey. Very cheap."

"No, we're walking," I replied.

"Long way. I take you."

"We want to walk," Natalie said.

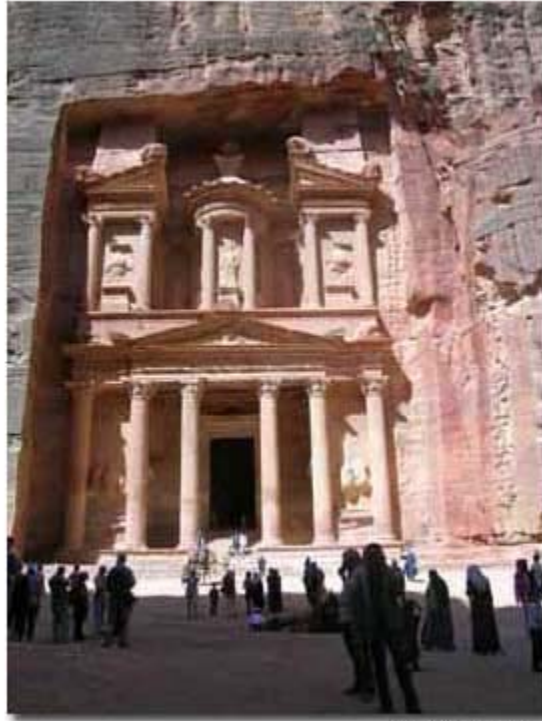
The man rode alongside us, insisting how much more comfortable the journey would be on a donkey. We waited until he passed before continuing. The ancient city of Petra was right below us.

Petra, chiseled out of the rock 2,200 years ago in Jordan, is considered a wonder of the ancient world.

Like Indiana Jones in *The Last Crusade*, we walked through the *siq*, a long narrow gorge that separates two massive rock cliffs and swallows you until suddenly it opens up, to a pink sandstone monolith with ornate façade and columns glinting in the sun, so ethereal that all you can do is gape.

We tagged along ancient colonnaded streets with a small American tour group and Ali, a Jordanian guide, learning about the ancient Nabateans: Arabian nomads who controlled the incense and spice trade and settled in Petra in the third century B.C.

From the rock face, they chiseled gigantic royal tombs and monuments by hand, each more spectacular than the last. But I am neither an archeology nor history buff, and after a while, I felt "Petra-fied."



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The plan was lunch, then a climb to a building known as the Monastery or go off on our own and meet back at 5 p.m. There was also the possibility of climbing the 1,500-foot high (458 meters) Jebel Haroun, Aaron's Mount, which was the resting place of Moses' brother, Aaron, and is considered one of Petra's holiest and most spiritual places. Ali said it was a very hard four-hour hike and would mean leaving now and skipping lunch.

Chiseled out of rock some 2,200 years ago, Petra is considered one of the wonders of the ancient world.

I couldn't see the white-domed Aaron's Shrine on the mountain, because it was hidden by craggy peaks, however I was tired of the ruins and a new challenge sounded good. My tour-mate, Natalie, was also up for the adventure. We grabbed water and fruit and headed up towards the trailhead. I wondered if I was making the right choice - missing lunch and the famous Petra monastery for a four-hour climb to a small dome, but I'd already committed.

It was silent except for our footsteps on the gravelly path. The sun was napping behind a cloud, and there was a slight breeze — ideal hiking conditions.

As we climbed, we noticed caves similar to those we had seen in the main city below, except these were smaller and didn't have the ornately-carved features of the others.

In front of us was a sandstone mound the size of a two-car garage that looked like a giant igloo with a door and windows. A small boy of about five, wearing a dusty yellow shirt and pants, ran out of the cave and stood above us on a slab of rock — his front lawn. He grinned and waved.

"*Marhaba!*" we called out, "Hello!"

"Hello! Hello!" Six more children came running



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A Bedouin woman in a traditional scarf.

from the cave, ranging in age from two, to a girl of about 13, who wore the traditional robe and headscarf. "Hello," she said.

"Marhaba," we replied.

"Where you come from?" she asked.

"America," we replied.

Three women appeared in traditional dress and headscarf, one pregnant. We exchanged greetings. They were three families, Bedouins.

Ali had told us that the late King Hussein (father of the present King) built the Bedouins homes, but the nomadic tribe prefers to live in tents and caves the way they have for centuries.

"You come, tea?" asked the first woman.

Bedouins treat every visitor as a guest, and the idea of sitting down with a real family, seeing Petra behind the scenes, was enticing. But we didn't know how long the climb would take, so we declined, hoping there'd be enough time to stop on our way back.

Further up the trail, goats and sheep grazed. We passed more caves with doors and windows. Off to the side of the trail was a black-haired goat tent where camels sat. It was like being transported back in time.

Then the trail disappeared, the hills and sandstone formations gave way to granite rocks, and we picked our way around large boulders. A group of Germans with hiking sticks came towards us and we nodded 'Hello.'

An hour later, there was still no sign of a white dome, but every here and there was a *cairn*, a trail marker made from a few stones piled on top of each other, or an empty coke can with Arabic letters — so this had to be the way. The trail was getting steeper and we still couldn't see the summit. Was this really a four-hour hike, or had we misunderstood and it was four hours each way?

Ahead of us, a man tied his donkey to a tree. Good. That meant we were probably close to the top. Usually, I have a terrible sense of direction and I panic when lost, but I was strangely calm. It was as if an unseen guide was protecting us, leaving a *cairn* or soda can at just the right moment. Was this what it meant to be on a spiritual mountain?

After a long while, we saw a faded sign in Arabic and English, "Tea shop." Two Bedouin men sat under a small tarp in rickety chairs drinking tea.

"*Marhaba!*" I said. "Is it far to the top?"

"A Salam Alakim. Not far. Tea?" they asked.

"No, thank you," we said.

"Where is your guide?"

"We are our own guide!" I grinned.

Another half-hour, we could finally see the dome above us. My legs ached as we climbed a long flight of stairs that looked as though it had been recently cemented into the mountainside. The platform offered an unobstructed view as far as the horizon, like looking out of an airplane.

We "high-fived" and looked way down below to the craggy rocks, at arid plains and sandstone formations. Although we weren't sure exactly where, we knew we were also looking at Egypt, Israel and Saudi Arabia, all which border Jordan.



Camels pass us along the way.

A door led to a small room with a table, a guest book and not much else. As we signed our names, a teenage Arab boy entered, startling us.

"You go up?" he asked.

"There's more?"

He led us to the other side of the platform, where a final set of stairs led to the roof next to the white dome, Aaron's shrine. We sat quietly and looked out.

Then it was time to head down. We passed the tea drinkers, the Bedouin tents and camels, the herds of goats and sheep, to the spot where we had seen the family.

The children and mothers came running out to greet us. In front of the cave sat a Bedouin man in western dress. Next to him was a huge black pot where a dead lamb hung from a tripod. The man skinned the animal with an old metal knife.

'Would you like to stay for dinner?' he asked. I looked at my watch, tempted. It was almost 5 p.m. and time to meet the others back at the van. If we stayed, we'd miss our ride. And even if there was such a thing as a taxi, I didn't remember the name of our hotel because it was in Arabic.

I shook my head 'No', putting my palms together



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Skinning a lamb for dinner

to thank him for the invitation. As we headed down, I realized we'd spent all our time trying to reach the top of the mountain when the real journey was right here.

If You Go

Jordan Tourism Board of North America
877-733-5673

<http://www.seejordan.org/> (info@seejordan.org)

To see Petra another way

If you can't get to Petra, the exhibit, "Petra: Lost City of Stone" will be at the Cincinnati Art Museum from Sept. 14, 2004 - Jan 30, 2005, with more than 200 objects dating from the first century B.C. to the sixth century A.D., the most comprehensive exhibition ever presented on Petra, with many treasures on view in the United

States for the first time. Call 513-721-2787 or visit <http://www.cincinnatiartmuseum.org/>.