

Horse Riding Tour in Wadi Rum, December 2010

At the start of November, I decided to escape the dreary, dark and miserable December weather for a while this year and finally take part in the Wadi Rum horse riding tour. I'd wanted to ride through this desert on purebred Arabian horses for a long time. As there was no other option flight-wise, I signed up on the spur of the moment for the Christmas tour. Apart from me, there were five other participants, from Switzerland, Canada and France. Fortunately, my flight on 17 December wasn't cancelled despite the snow chaos setting in, and it got me to Amman on time. Getting there is really straightforward: first you change money, then you get a tourist visa issued at the counter for 10 JD (approx. 11 EUR). Our driver is already waiting for us. The first day is devoted to Petra. All the guidebooks say that one day is far too short, and indeed we don't manage to see everything. But it's absolutely stunning: the impressive deep gorge known as the 'Siq' (German: gorge), the ancient ruins – ranging from Nabataean tombs to Roman temples – and the red, pink and yellow-coloured sandstone. Our guide knows the history inside out, and once again I'm sorry that I can't remember such things, no matter how vividly they're presented. Thanks to the persuasive skills of my Swiss fellow rider, I did manage to climb onto a dromedary for a brief moment. Well, it was nice for the photo... Otherwise, though, I'm really looking forward to the horse ride finally getting underway, so I'm not too sad that we're leaving Petra again the very next morning.



We head to Wadi Rum via the 'Dessert Highway'; as we drive along the motorway, we look out over a rather barren, completely parched and deserted landscape, with only the ever-present plastic rubbish providing a splash of colour. After just under an hour

we reach the stables in Rum Village. The horses are already ready to go, and within 10 minutes we're in the saddle. Maryse from Canada immediately volunteered to take the stallion Antar. I'm given a calm bay gelding called Saim. First, we ride at a walk to a lovely picnic spot. Here, in the shade of a huge rock face, we take a break for about two hours. The view is superb and I enjoy the sunshine I've missed for so long. Afterwards, we ride on through the impressive desert, shimmering in shades of pink and yellow, and admire the mighty rocks towering up all around us. The vegetation is very sparse and consists mainly of dry shrubs, which the horses only eat once they've dried out. There's also a dark-green leek-like plant that the horses avoid entirely. During our breaks, they instead search the sand for small, withered twigs – the sort of thing you wouldn't dream of feeding to any animal in Germany. Normally, the Christmas and New Year's Eve tour has a fixed base camp, but as the weather is stable, we decide to spend the first two nights under huge rock overhangs. So we sleep by the campfire without a tent. When we reach the camp on the third day, we are all given our own igloo tent in which to stow our belongings – which is very handy. I'll only sleep in it for one night, though, as it's somehow rather uncomfortable, cold and lonely inside. From then on, my spot is next to the fire pit in the open Bedouin tent. Here, we sit together in the evenings with our guide Suleman and the rest of the staff. Suleman has 17 siblings, and his brothers each work as guides for a few years.

His successor, Ali, is also here to learn the 'trade' from his older brother. Ali entertains us with games and stories and is always ready to help. During the long lunch break and in the evening darkness, we climb the surrounding rocks; in the glow of the full moon, there's a magical atmosphere in the desert.

During the six days of riding, we explore ever-changing gorges and plains, and are delighted anew each time by the colours and shapes. Only the first two days of riding aren't quite perfect, as one of the Frenchmen turns out to be a complete beginner. On the second day, he slips off his horse whilst it is merely trotting. Initially, the plan was to give him a new, particularly calm horse, but our guides then suggest he go on hikes and jeep tours instead, which he does. Afterwards, we trot and gallop unhindered, sometimes covering longer distances. Most of the time, however, we ride at a walk, but it never gets boring, as the landscape around us keeps us spellbound. A highlight is the huge sand dune, as well as the large bridge under which we all pose one after the other for a photo. We also marvel at rock carvings, ancient Nabataean dams and huge rock faces. Apparently, however, no sleeping tourists have yet been buried beneath them...



My horse is swapped on the third day, as Saim had colic on the first evening and needs to recover. Instead, I'm now given the tireless Saba. On the first day, her enthusiasm is almost uncontrollable, especially at a gallop. But once I've worked out the best position for her to ride in when galloping, things become much more relaxed. We now have a fairly clear order: the three spirited mares at the front, then the more laid-back geldings, and finally the stallion Antar. I like Saba's temperament; she's sensitive but very friendly. She's just not particularly keen on Nabataean dams and Laurencean structures, so I tend to notice these things only in passing whilst riding past. Well, I'm far more interested in the vast landscape than in these stone walls anyway...

The more than 20 horses live together in a large open stable. Given their temperament, minor nips and kicks are impossible to avoid entirely. On our return, we watch the horses romping about boisterously. Along the way, the horses are tethered on long ropes; at base camp, there are also a few stalls available. They lie calmly in the sand, dozing.

On the final day of riding, a bizarre surprise awaits us: Mufleh, our guide's eldest brother, invites us to watch the dromedary race training. Naturally, we don't say no and climb into the overcrowded jeep. As he's in a hurry, we race along the sandy tracks at breakneck speed; if only I'd been wearing my riding helmet – it would have been more useful here than whilst riding... Incidentally, all the speedometers on the desert jeeps are broken; we would have loved to know how fast we were travelling. When we arrive, two dromedaries are just being prepared for training. Mufleh proudly shows us his huge dromedary, which is carrying a small box behind its hump. There's no need for a rider; in Jordan,

dromedaries are driven in races like remote-controlled cars, using a walkie-talkie. There's also a remote-controlled whip, in case the animals ignore the voice commands. Whilst the dromedary gallops along the 4 km-long racecourse, we drive alongside it in a total of four vehicles. "We used to put our children on them, but we've had the walkie-talkies for three years now, so that's no longer necessary," explains Mufleh. The men spend the whole day with their dromedaries; it's a proper national sport, but for us Europeans it's a completely mad experience.



Back with the horses, we set off on our final ride, back to the stables. One last time across the vast plain – we could ride on like this forever. At night, you simply find a rock face, light a small campfire, sip the sweet black tea... what a life! But no, here comes our cruel driver to take us to Kerak for a tour of the castle. The ancient, massive Crusader castle towers atop a high, conical mountain and the view is breathtaking. Afterwards, we head for the Dead Sea, which we reach just in time before sunset. Check-in at our 5-star luxury hotel is much like at an airport and simply takes far too long. We have 15 minutes left to float on the sea and smear ourselves with mud. To make up for it, after a week of flatbread, rice, lamb, chicken and vegetables, we enjoy the huge buffet to the full. Europe is once again reporting snow chaos, and I secretly hope that the flight won't be able to take off this time. After all, I'm still on holiday and would happily spend another week riding through Wadi Rum. However, there are no problems whatsoever with the return flight, so I suppose I'll just have to come back another time...

Jessica Kiefer

Link to the trip: <http://www.reiterreisen.com/rum010.htm>