

Jordan – Wadi Rum Desert Ride



In March 2020, I set off for Jordan, as it had always been a dream of mine to see the rock-cut city of Petra and the Wadi Rum desert. After a five-hour flight from Frankfurt to Amman, I first went to the airport to get a visa. You can pay for the visa by credit card directly at the counter. However, you can also withdraw Jordanian dinars from a cash machine and pay with those. Everything is very well signposted, and the visa clearance process for tourists is carried out very quickly and efficiently.

At around 10 pm, I was given a very warm welcome in the arrivals hall by Anes, our driver. Other riders had already arrived at midday, and some were even due to arrive in Amman after me. Anes, whose English was very good, loaded my luggage into a minibus and we set off towards Madaba to our hotel. The minibus had Wi-Fi and was air-conditioned. I hadn't exactly expected such luxury. After 20 minutes, we arrived at a small 3-star hotel. Anes accompanied me inside and made sure I was given my key and could check into my room. He then said goodbye, as he still had other guests to pick up. I was very tired anyway and was glad to find a clean and cosy room waiting for me. It was simply furnished with a double bed, a TV, a wardrobe, a table and chair, and some storage space. There was a balcony too. The room naturally had an en-suite bathroom, which was fitted with a bath. A hairdryer, towels and soap were provided. Small bottles of shower gel and shampoo were also available. All in all, I was completely satisfied.

The next day, my alarm went off at 6.30 am; it was already light outside and it looked set to be a lovely day. At 7 am, I met up with the rest of the riders for

breakfast. The group, all women, consisted of two Swiss women, one American, four French women and myself. So there were eight of us in total, which I felt was a good group size. We were aged between 19 and 54. We agreed to speak English. The breakfast was simple, but everyone still found something to their taste. There was Arabic flatbread with butter or jam, various dips such as sesame spread, as well as yoghurt and a small selection of muesli. Fresh scrambled eggs were served to us by the chef himself. Anyone who's a bit flexible when it comes to their eating habits and is open to trying new things will definitely find something to their liking at this buffet. At 8 o'clock, we set off for the rock-cut city of Petra. Our luggage was stowed away and we sped off. Today's journey took 3 hours. The sun was already beating down relentlessly, but that didn't bother us as we were travelling in a comfortably air-conditioned car. Anes gave us some interesting information about Jordan – its politics, culture and landscape; he was really well-informed and we had absolutely no trouble understanding his English. We had a good laugh. We stopped off for a toilet break along the way. At the service station, which had really decent toilets, we were also able to buy something to drink and eat for the day. Anyone who fancied a hot meal could, of course, go for a meal at a restaurant in Petra. Our group, however, preferred to stock up on all sorts of tasty treats. The landscape changed quite frequently during the journey. In Amman, there were actually lush green fields just like back home. After just an hour's drive, the landscape became hillier and more arid, until steep rock faces dominated the scenery as we approached Petra. We checked into our hotel. There was even a swimming pool and a small garden at the hotel. The room was lovely and clean and had everything we needed. My room had a balcony again, and the bathroom was equipped with the same toiletries as in the first hotel. Shortly afterwards, we set off on foot towards the rock-cut city. We were led by our guide, Adel, whom we'd met shortly before in the hotel lobby. Everyone took a rucksack with provisions. Of course, we made sure to pack plenty of water and sun cream, as it was already 27 degrees and was set to get even hotter. Once we arrived at the visitor centre, Adel collected our admission tickets. He explained that he would accompany us for a while before we had some free time. The rock city was very quiet today, as the coronavirus was already on the rise and some people had already decided not to travel. I was told that it's normally at least four times as busy. So we were lucky. The guided tour was very informative, and Adel's English was also very easy to understand. He was happy to answer questions in detail. We were a very interested and outgoing group and got on well with one another in no time. After 2½ hours, Adel said goodbye, pointing out various options for the rest of the day. Everyone could now decide for themselves what else they wanted to see in the rock city. There's so much to see that, unfortunately, you can't manage to see every highlight in just one day. We decided to hike together to Ad Deir, a 1st-century monastery built into the rock. Yes, I deliberately say 'hike', as it was quite a steep climb. Forty-five minutes and several hundred steps later, we arrived. It was simply breathtaking, and every drop of sweat was worth the effort. We were rewarded not only with the sight of Ad Deir, some 50 metres wide and 39 metres high, but also with a magnificent view over the rocky mountains and canyons of Petra. I felt as though I were in another world, less than 24 hours after boarding the plane in Germany – what a start to the horse-riding trip! We took a break and let the landscape sink in.



Ad Deir, dating from the 1st century. The adjoining bistro provides refreshments.

Towards the afternoon, we set off back towards the main entrance. That took around two hours. From there, it was a ten-minute walk to the hotel. Until dinner at 7 pm, everyone was free to do as they pleased. I decided to have a shower and a little time to rest. When we arrived at the restaurant, a large, round, beautifully laid table was waiting for us. There was a lavish buffet with meat, fish and vegetarian dishes. Everything was there, from local specialities to burgers and chips. Drinks were ordered at the table and paid for separately by us. Anes, our driver, turned up as a surprise guest, as it was one of our fellow riders' birthday. He was holding a large birthday cake, which we all happily tucked into. Over the course of the day, we'd really grown together as a close-knit group.

The next day, breakfast was waiting for us at 7 am before we set off again in our minibus at 8 am. Anes was waiting for us in his usual cheerful manner. We loaded the luggage and headed for our first stop, a viewpoint high above the city of Petra. The weather was a bit cloudier and windier today than the day before, so we didn't stay up there for too long. The view was magnificent. After a two-hour drive and a toilet break, the steep rock faces of Petra had turned into the finest grains of sand. Desert as far as the eye could see now lay before us. Only in a few places was the desert broken up by massive sandstone rock formations. By now, the sun was once again our faithful companion. We finally arrived at the horses in Wadi Rum Village. The yard was small, simple and had a sandy floor throughout. There are three stalls and a tack room. Most of the horses are kept in

the large sandy paddock, where they roam freely in the herd. The horses are led to wide feeding stalls to eat. These are situated right next to the riding arena and are covered. From a distance, we could see that our horses were just being saddled. We first met Suleman. He introduced himself in English as our guide. Two other gentlemen introduced themselves as the cook and the groom. So this was the 'Trio Infernale' who were to accompany us during our six days in the Wadi Rum desert and look after our well-being. Suleman had a list with all our names and details. He allocated the horses and everyone swung straight into the saddle, as we'd already put on our riding breeches at the hotel in Petra. Anes and the two assistants stowed our luggage securely in a pick-up truck, which also carried sleeping mats, horse feed and other equipment. Anes said goodbye to us for the next few days. From then on, Suleman was in charge and served as our daily point of contact. He knows the Wadi Rum desert like the back of his hand and was always on hand to offer advice and assistance. The horses were all purebred Arabians or Arabian crosses. There was a horse of the right size and temperament for everyone. Confident riders were given lively, forward-going horses, whilst those who were a little less confident were mounted on calmer, mostly older horses. Generally speaking, however, you should have very good riding skills for this trek, as the majority of the horses are keen to move forward and there were a few faster gallops along the way. We rode in eventing saddles with standard water bridles. In addition, each saddle cloth had two saddle bags for stowing water, sun cream and other small items. The first ride was a little shorter to get to know the horses. The pace was moderate, though there were the odd trot and canter. After 1½ hours, we stopped for a meal in the shade of a massive rock outcrop. The horses were unsaddled, unharnessed and tied up. They were given a little hay to fortify themselves and, of course, fresh water. Each of us helped to look after the horses. Everything had already been prepared for the riders, and the car with our luggage was also there. Lunch consisted of rice with vegetables, along with a bean stew and a cucumber and tomato salad. The whole meal was served with delicious Arabic flatbread. On the knee-high table, which had been placed on a large rug, there was a self-service selection of water, tea, a few juices and date biscuits.





After the meal, we had an hour of free time. Some riders sunbathed or dozed off, others went for a walk, whilst still others were tempted to climb the massive rocks in the middle of the desert. There were also one or two good photo spots to discover. After the break, the horses were groomed and prepared, and we continued deeper into the desert. The colourful sandstone canyons became increasingly impressive. We finally arrived at Khazali Canyon, where we dismounted. In pairs, the riders ventured deeper into the canyon to the Talmudic inscriptions. It was amazing to see how people used to communicate in the past. Once everyone had had a chance to take it all in, we rode on. We still had a few stretches of trotting and galloping ahead of us that afternoon before we set up camp for the night. The horses were unsaddled, untethered, fed and watered again. By now, the procedure had become routine for us. The equipment was laid out on a large blanket to protect it from the sandy ground. We were also able to leave our helmets and other gear there. Nothing could be stolen, as there was no one else around for miles. Just as with lunch, everything had already been prepared. Our camp for the night was to be set up beneath a rocky outcrop. A small dining area with a large rug, mats and a table had already been laid out. The drinks were already out too, and the water for tea was just being boiled over a fire pit. You could also smell the delicious aroma of the food. Until dinner, everyone was free to spend their time as they pleased. Most of us changed into fresh clothes, sat round the table and chatted animatedly to get to know each other better. A few washed themselves. That wasn't quite so easy here, as there are no showers. Small watering cans filled with water are provided. You could take these with you to wash either in a small tent or somewhere behind a rock. For dinner, we had rice with chicken, served with salad and a stew. The

Arabic flatbread was a must, and to finish off, of course, our now-favourite date biscuits and other sweet treats from the region. As we were all very tired and there isn't much in the way of entertainment in the desert, we all grabbed a mat and our sleeping bag relatively early after dinner and set up our beds for the night wherever we fancied. Anyone who wanted to could have a tent. However, nobody in our group wanted one, so we slept under the open sky every night. I hadn't seen such bright stars for a long time. Unlike during the day, when it was around 27 degrees, it did cool down considerably at night. But a medium-weight sleeping bag and long nightwear were definitely enough to ensure a restful sleep.



I kept waking up during the night because I could hear the horses – and, unfortunately, on one occasion, the snoring of a fellow rider – but after another two nights I'd got used to it. If you're a light sleeper, don't forget to bring earplugs. The following days all followed the same pattern. We had breakfast at around 7 am and then packed up camp. The horses were saddled and we set off at around 8.30 or 9. After about 3½ hours in the saddle, we stopped for lunch at a beautiful spot with delicious food and at least an hour's break, then rode on for about 2½ hours to our camp for the night. This was followed by dinner with pleasant conversation round the fire, before we settled down for the night. As we explored a new landscape every day, we never got bored despite the routine remaining the same. Sometimes the landscape looked more like an oasis with palm trees; sometimes we climbed up part of a canyon on horseback; sometimes the desert was covered in small green plants; sometimes it was more reddish, sometimes more white; sometimes we could see huge black mountains in the distance

, sometimes we'd have a cup of tea in a Bedouin tent, sometimes there were various rock formations, sometimes we saw free-roaming camels and sometimes a Bedouin with his sheep. There were new highlights every day, even though we never left the Wadi Rum desert the whole time.



The route was always adapted to the weather. For example, we had to change our route once due to a sandstorm. Every day we rode a good mix of walk, trot and canter. Generally, we cantered in a line or in pairs side by side, and did so in a very controlled manner. One day we were even allowed to have a race against each other and were able to make full use of the desert's vast expanse for it. It was a very adventurous ride. Despite their temperament, the horses were easy to handle, sure-footed, responsive to the aids and always up for a bit of fun. They were neither skittish nor unruly. Some were just a bit livelier than others, but the right riders were matched to them. We were also able to swap horses amongst ourselves. On the final evening, there was another feast. Vegetables, meat and potatoes were cooked in a deep hole in the ground. The whole meal was served in the traditional way with plenty of side dishes.



There was singing and dancing, and to round things off, we presented our three tour guides with an envelope containing some money as a thank-you for this wonderful and unique experience. The next morning, after breakfast, we set off on a three-hour ride back to the stables. When we arrived, Anes was already waiting for us with our minibus. We unsaddled the horses, took them to the riding arena and said goodbye to them. We were all now looking forward to the beach, so we continued our journey until, after two hours, we arrived in Aqaba on the Red Sea. Aqaba is a tourist town. You'll find not only Europeans there, but also a great many locals and visitors from Israel who are spending their holidays by the sea. However, I never felt unsafe at any point. We checked into a very modern and centrally located hotel. In my opinion, it offered a little more comfort than the others. A

hotel's own swimming pool was, of course, a must. There were plenty of small shops, banks and restaurants around the hotel. The rest of the day was free for us to spend as we wished. So we first grabbed a quick bite to eat and headed to the beach. The sea was a 10-minute walk away. After about a 7-minute walk, we passed an impressive mosque. It was open to visitors, but we decided to carry on towards the sea, as the day was unfortunately too short to fit in all the activities. Anyone who wanted to could also book a snorkelling trip or go diving. Aqaba offers a variety of water sports. The beach consists of a long promenade. It was packed with people. It actually wasn't that easy to find a spot. Many local families were enjoying a spot of sunbathing. The beach is very suitable for children as it slopes gently. The water was a rather dark blue and a bit murky, but at 19 degrees Celsius it was already quite a pleasant temperature. The cleanliness of the beach varied greatly. There were lovely sections that were very clean, and sections where there were large numbers of young people hanging about, drinking alcohol and smoking shisha, which left a lot to be desired in terms of cleanliness. However, if you walk a little way down the beach, you'll find a nice spot. Dinner was served again at 7 pm. A delicious buffet had been laid out, featuring some local specialities as well as classic dishes such as chicken with buttered vegetables. For dessert, there was custard and cake. We paid for our drinks separately again. I headed home the next morning. All the other riders set off back north towards the Dead Sea. Unfortunately, I couldn't join them for that day. But the others told me that it was absolutely fantastic at the Dead Sea and that the hotel was apparently just as comfortable as the one we'd stayed in the day before, and also had a huge pool area.

I said a warm goodbye to all my fellow riders and to Anes. We all exchanged numbers before a private driver, whom Anes had organised for me, took me to the airport. On the plane, I was able to reflect once more on all the experiences I'd had. For me, the trip to Jordan was an absolute highlight of 2020, one that I'll be drawing on for a long time to come. I'll particularly remember the hospitable people, the excellent organisation of the trip, the spirited horses and, above all, the absolutely unique landscape. This certainly won't be my last trip to Jordan – the land of shapes and colours!

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