Horse riding in the Arabian style through the world's most spectacular desert

Jordan: Riding on Arabian horses through the world's most spectacular desert, 16–25 March 2012

Galloping through the vastness of a desert coloured in every conceivable shade of beige, yellow, orange and red, past mighty rock formations; cheerful evenings around the campfire with Arabic specialities in the company of Bedouins; sleeping under a sparkling starry sky; a visit to the magnificent rock city of Petra; swimming in the Dead Sea with a view of Israel, visiting Al Karak Fortress and Mount Nebo – these highlights combine to create a unique journey through the land of the Nabataeans!

After arriving in Amman and spending the night in a lovely little hotel in Madaba, we set off the next morning on a 4-hour drive through varied countryside to Wadi Rum, where our 6-day desert adventure begins after a first Arabic lunch in the stables. Our group, consisting of a French couple, a Czech man and another German, gets on splendidly right from the start, and we set off amid laughter – each with our four-legged companion for the next few days. Before we fully surrender ourselves to the desert, a few children from the tranquil Rum Village run after us, then stop and watch us go for a while. A few free-roaming camels stroll past us; they belong to the tents pitched against the high rock face that surrounds Rum Village. Then we plunge into the endless expanse of the desert, which owes its uniqueness to the rock formations

that tower above the entire desert in a wide variety of forms – sometimes more concentrated, sometimes less so, sometimes impressively high, sometimes rather low – yet always very striking. We are immediately captivated by the vibrant play of colours, consisting of the deep blue of the sky and the ever-changing hues of the sand and rocks – such a beautiful and fitting contrast – incredible! Not only is every boulder and every patch of desert coloured in different shades of beige, yellow, orange and red, but the shifting sunlight also constantly brings out different fascinating hues in the desert, so that the same patch of desert never looks the same. Here and there a bush sprouts from the ground, and very occasionally one spots a scrawny little tree.

Eager for the days ahead, we arrive at the desert camp and tie the horses to long ropes beneath a steep rock face. A few steps above where we sleep, on a hill, lies the camp, consisting of a row of spacious white tents, their interior walls decorated with colourful Arabic patterns. We sleep on foam mattresses in sleeping bags – as warm as it can get during the day, so cold it can be at night... The ‘bathroom’ consists of a few concrete walls, behind which lie an outhouse, a washbasin and a simple shower room. The main tent is lined with carpets, mats and blankets, and at the back there is a fire pit where a fire blazes from morning until late into the night. In the flames, a pot of the typical sweet Arabic tea is kept warm, which is drunk from tiny glasses throughout the day – we quickly get used to this tea ritual, which is an integral part of Jordanian life. Soon a table is set up, on which our cook presents various delicacies that he conjures up in his very simple kitchen. Every meal includes Arabic flatbread; often this is accompanied by rice dishes with meat and vegetables, and in the mornings eggs and coffee are served with the bread, along with hummus, ‘lebanah’ (a kind of cream cheese), and ‘satah’ – herbs mixed with olive oil, into which you then dip the bread – delicious! We spend our first evening at the camp, as well as the evenings that follow, in cheerful company around the campfire, always in the company of some Bedouin friends and relatives of our guide Aied, who come from the village to the camp in the evenings. It is fascinating to listen to their stories, to discuss the current political and economic situation with them, to learn about their culture and, above all, to listen to their singing, which they accompany on a lute. So the evenings often drag on – twice I fall asleep by the warm fire and once outside in the silence of the night, gazing up at the sparkling starry sky. Just before I fall asleep, a shooting star falls from the sky – magical!

Over the following days, we go on rides both in the mornings and afternoons to different parts of Wadi Rum – on the first morning, for example, we ride to a rock with an impressively large hole in it – the rock resembles a bridge. Right next to it, a cosy tent has been pitched and a Bedouin invites us for tea. Almost all of us buy an Arab scarf from him – this protects against the sometimes very strong wind, but also against the sun when you have it wrapped around your head in the Arab style, which also looks rather smart. As fast as the wind, we gallop across the sand, roam through deep canyons, visit the ruins of Lawrence of Arabia's house, encounter camel caravans, marvel at the largest sand dune in Wadi Rum and even spot a fox. On one of our rides, we tie the horses to solitary trees and venture on foot into a gorge, where we come across rock paintings. The ever-changing landscape, the mighty rock formations and the rich palette of colours the desert offers never cease to impress us. On our final rides, we try our hand at Arabic singing – though this invariably ends in roars of laughter. Two guides lead us safely and skilfully through the desert: initially Suleman, who unfortunately falls ill and is therefore replaced by Aied. They tell us a great deal about the history of Wadi Rum and its unique features, explain the rock inscriptions to us, and are always up for a laugh. Each of us is happy with our horse (mostly purebred Arabians) – some prefer a more leisurely pace, but most are quite nippy at a gallop and love to run fast if you just let them. If we sometimes ride at a long walk, the gallop afterwards is all the more exhilarating – a treat for horse and rider alike. We all build a bond with our horse – mine even lets me

me to snuggle up to him for a while one morning after finding him still lying down.

In the mornings before riding, I often climb the rocks surrounding the camp to admire the sunrise – simply breathtaking! At midday, it's time for a siesta in the sun or for a game that a Bedouin teaches us: the
"game board" is shaped with fingers and sand, and small stones and sticks are used as pieces – a fun way to pass the time!

After unforgettable days in a magnificent desert, it's time to say goodbye far too soon, and with heavy hearts we ride back to the stable – but not without organising a little race to a spring... As we ride through the village, we notice the donkeys and camels in the backyards of some houses – an unusual sight for us Europeans! Back at the stables, the horses are given a much-needed shower by their caring groom and then happily join their companions. We're in luck: there's a wedding taking place in Rum Village today, to which Aied invites us on the spot. First, however, we're invited to visit Suleman, our first guide, who is now feeling better. In one room, we are served coffee on stylish cushions laid out on the floor in the Arabic style, and afterwards, in another very similar room, we are served tea. Then it's off to the wedding! There are two areas: one for the men and one for the women, the latter being strictly separated so that no glimpse can be caught of the interior unless one steps through the curtain. In front of the whole scene, an enclosure has been set up in which sheep and goats are crowded together – gifts for the bride and groom. The two of us women are let into the women's area, where we are quite astonished to hear the loud music and witness a joyful celebration in which veiled as well as Western-dressed Jordanian women are shaking the dance floor. Before leaving the venue, however, the latter wrap themselves back in their veils and scarves – they are unrecognisable afterwards. We are welcomed with open arms, and it is mainly the younger women and children who take an interest in us, trying to chat with us using their limited English and eagerly pulling us onto the dance floor.
The situation is quite different with the men, whom we, as Europeans, are allowed to observe: they sit in a semicircle on elegant mats beneath stretched tarpaulins, drinking tea, smoking a hookah or a cigarette, and chatting in hushed tones – what a contrast to the ladies' proceedings! For us, the wedding was certainly a very special experience, which gave us an even deeper insight into the lives of the Jordanians.

We have to say goodbye to almost all our fellow travellers in Rum Village; there are now just the two of us left. In the evening, we arrive in Petra at the Amra Palace, a beautiful 4-star hotel that also has a spa area. Here, a lavish buffet with all manner of delicacies awaits us. The next morning, we set off for the ancient rock-cut city – the other Petra. Here we are given an interesting guided tour and admire the ancient buildings and facades carved into the rock, the vast spatial scale of the Nabataean city, and are particularly impressed by the mighty treasury carved into a high rock face and the monastery towering high above the city. Having already walked a long way and climbed quite high, my travelling companion takes a break for a while with a cool drink, enjoying a magnificent view over the vast expanse of Petra. I venture a little further and arrive at a place called the 'End of the World'. And

that is exactly the impression given by the solitary rocky outcrop, which offers a breathtaking view of a seemingly endless mountain landscape. The place immediately captivates me: apart from a Jordanian who has pitched his tent there and is offering tea, I am alone. The Bedouin is crouched
at the very front on a rocky ledge, beneath which the ground drops steeply to unseen depths; he dangles his legs and plays his lute – I feel as though I've been transported to another world. Enthused, I too sit down on a rocky outcrop and let the surreal scene wash over me.

After a relaxing evening at the Amra Palace in Petra, our destination the next morning is Al Karak Fortress, a sprawling ruin through which we stroll for a while, enjoying the view over the surrounding villages and countryside. On the onward journey to Madaba, we make a stop at the Dead Sea, which, due to its high salt content and the resulting high density of the water, can support people – blissfully, we let ourselves float idly on the water whilst looking across to Israel, which appears very close from the water – a fantastic experience! We continue on to Mount Nebo, which also offers a view of Israel. Before arriving in Madaba, we visit a mosaic workshop where we are shown the individual steps involved in mosaic-making. In Madaba, we are staying at the same hotel as on the first day. As it is only the afternoon, I decide to take a stroll through the town, visiting a church, popping into the odd shop and observing the cheerful hustle and bustle.

Early the next morning, we head to Amman and from there back home – not without a touch of sadness. These eventful ten days have given us a wonderful insight into a completely different world. Much of it will remain unforgettable: the rides on the gentle horses through the world's most spectacular desert, the hospitality and warmth of the Bedouins, the delicious Arabic cuisine, the various fascinating landscapes, the ancient, impressive rock city of Petra, the experience of being able to float in the water without sinking, and last but not least, the fantastic group!

Lara von Breidenbach

Programme: http://www.equitour.com/rum010.htm and http://www.equitour.com/pet010.htm (by Petra to Wadi Rum)