

# TRAVEL

## Arabian days

**Wadi Rum's Bedouins make a trip to the Jordan desert a heart-warming one**

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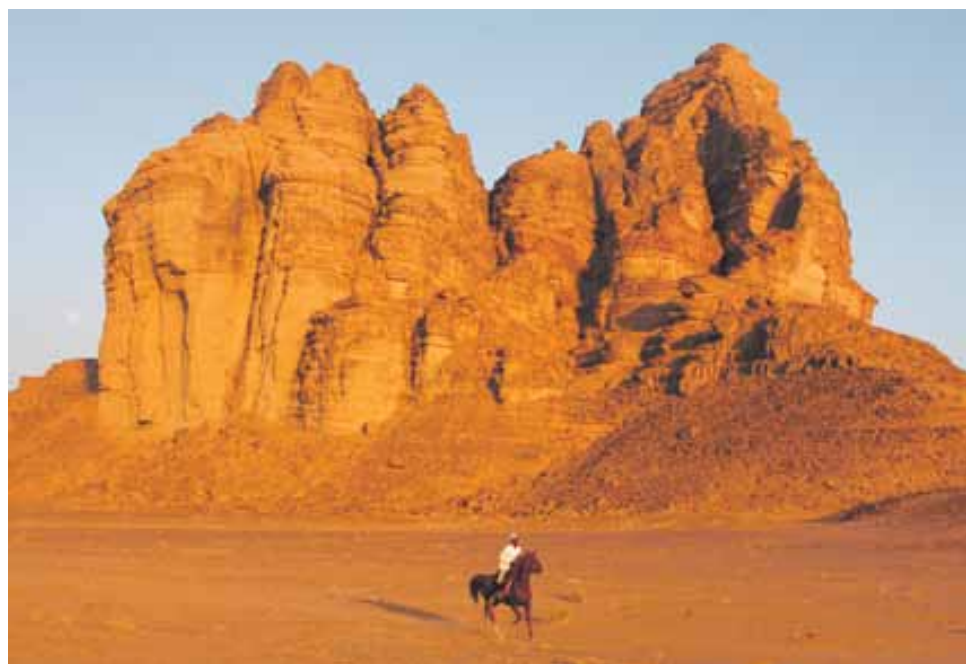
IN THE rose-red desert, a Bedouin in a full-length tunic and a red-and-white checked headscarf ambled on camel. As we drove past, he waved languidly, a big smile on his weathered face.

We were deep in Wadi Rum, an immense rock valley in southern Jordan. A land of canyons, sand dunes and rugged cliffs perfect for rock climbing, it is both a destination for adventure seekers and a home for the Zalabea Bedouin tribe. If Wadi Rum looks familiar, it's because the valley was the setting for the desert classic *Lawrence Of Arabia*, and more recently, one of the locations for *Transformers: Revenge Of The Fallen*.

**A desert cuppa**

The drive across the sprawling landscape was bewitchingly beautiful. The colour of the terrain changed from a shade of camel to terracotta red. From the ground rose sandstone mounts (or jebels) and our jeep rolled in their shade over shrubs-strewn earth into the desert, and nomad's land.

As we approached a patch of rock, a Bedouin family waved for us to stop. Mohammed, our guide, explained that this



(Above) The rock valley of Wadi Rum was the setting for the movie classic, *Lawrence Of Arabia*.

was the Bedouin way of welcoming visitors. My partner and I stepped out onto the red sand to a pot of steaming tea. Clad in the Bedouin outfit of tunic and headscarf, our hosts shook our hands and greeted us in Arabic: "As-Salam Alaykum." — "Hello."

They watched us sip the sweet tea with curious eyes and gentle smiles. Back in the car, I asked Mohammed if they were his friends. He laughed and said he'd never met them before, but in their culture, everyone is a brother.

**Valley romping**

The landscape continued to throw up surprises, with jebels, canyons and dunes providing a wide range of geological formations to explore.

Historically, Wadi Rum served as a battlefield for the Arab revolt against Ottoman Turkish rule led by British officer

T E Lawrence in 1916. Regarded as a war hero, Lawrence lives on not only in film, but also in the desert sites he frequented, including Lawrence's Spring — an oasis where he used to wash.

We drove through imposing jebels before reaching Khazali Canyon, which had well-preserved ancient Nabatean carvings of humans and antelopes. Further south, we came across the enormous sandstone mound of Jebel Qabar Amra and hiked up to view the rose-red valley from above.

Then, Mohammed got us ready for his favourite part of the trip: Crossing the Umm Frouth Rock Bridge — a natural rock arch formed as a result of centuries of erosion. We reached it after trekking up and through the rocks.

"Are you sure the bridge is not going to fall?" I asked, eyeing the strip of rock we were treading on as we made our way across the span.

In response, Mohammed laughed and jumped on the bridge. It didn't collapse and we got the thrill of standing in one of the most stunning spots in the valley.

The further we travelled through Wadi Rum, the more it seemed to expand. The feeling was intensified when we arrived at Wadi Umm Ishrin. Undulating sand dunes rolled into the horizon. Mohammed skilfully manoeuvred the 4x4 up and down the dunes, ramping the accelerator to prevent us from getting stuck in the sand. The



Umm Frouth Rock Bridge at Wadi Rum.

**WARM GESTURE**

**A Bedouin family waved for us to stop and offered us tea. In their culture, everyone is a brother.**



Nellie Huang

ride was a thrilling prelude to our walk on the dunes.

**View from a jebel**

Later, at the foothills, we stumbled upon another group of Bedouins who invited us into their tent for some shade and tea. The traditional black tent, made from goat's fur, provided cooling respite from the heat. Before heading off, I told them I hoped to see them again.

"Inshaa Allah" — "God willing" — replied our host, a common phrase here.

It was dusk by the time we settled in Lawrence Camp, where we would be sleeping under starry skies. In a bid to catch the sunset from the best spot in Wadi Rum, we clambered up a nearby jebel as the last rays lit the desert a shade of red. We'd come to Jordan with no idea what to expect, and now we would return with the memory of warm hospitality.



AFP

**Trip tips**

Visit in April, May, September and October, when temperatures are milder. Emirates, Qatar and Singapore Airlines fly to Amman, the capital of Jordan, with one stopover. The flight is about 13 hours and costs about \$1,400 return. From Amman, head to

Petra, a historic city that's also one of the seven world wonders. Wadi Rum is a one-and-a-half-hour bus ride from Petra. A more convenient way to get there is to book a tour: **Bedouin Guides** ([www.bedouinguides.com](http://www.bedouinguides.com)) offers trekking tours, jeep safaris and camel tours, as well as canyoning and

rock-climbing programmes. **Wadi Rum Mountain Guides** ([www.rumguides.com](http://www.rumguides.com)) has similar tours. A two-day jeep-and-camel tour costs \$130, including transfers, meals and overnight camp stay. **Wadi Rum Sunset** ([www.wadirumsunset.com](http://www.wadirumsunset.com)) arranges more than 11 different tours.

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