

Jordan – Day 3 – Amman – Wadi Rum

Day J3 – Amman – Wadi Rum – Petra

Today featured a run to Wadi Rum, the largest wadi in Jordan, made famous by Lawrence of Arabia.

The drill was wake up at 06:15, bags at 07:30 and departure at 08:00 hrs. With a group of 42 there was no way the bags would come down and be loaded by 08:00 hrs. We left at 08:18 and did a city tour that replicated some of what the small group had done the day before.

I forgot to mention that since the start we have had a Jordanian Tourist Policeman riding shotgun. It is both comforting and disconcerting.

Did you know that smoking one hubbly bubbly water pipe is the equivalent of from 40 to 60 cigarettes? Jordanian men seem to smoke everywhere.

We visited the upscale Abdoun neighbourhood and then passed in front of the American Embassy. It should be renamed Festung Amerika.

There are between 200 and 250 thousand Bedouins. Their tents are made from goat's hair. You are not advised to drink camel milk as it will make you quite ill for a couple of days.

We got onto the six lane highway going south. I had grabbed a seat on the west side so that I would not fry and so I would be shooting down sun.

The Queen Alia airport, where I landed on October 13th, is a long way out of the city. Shortly thereafter the six lanes dropped to four and by 09:50 we were into the desert with only a smattering of small buildings. There were Bedouin tents with mixed flocks of sheep and goats.

We went through the first of several arbitrary police stops and at 10:00 we went past an Army post – no photos.

Phosphates are big business. The mined product is piled up like mini mesas awaiting shipment. The train line that Lawrence of Arabia liked to blow up is used to ship the phosphate to the Port of Aqaba. That original line was built by the Ottomans with German assistance.

At 10:30 we had a toilet stop at the Midway Castle. Some entrepreneur has built this tourist trap in

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the middle of the desert and snares every passing tourist coach. The Tour Manager came up to me to say that the hotel had called saying that my bag was outside my room. Long story short, the hotel bell boys pulled a no-no and the hotel shipped my bag to the hotel in Petra where would arrive later today.

Back on the coach, the Tour Manager described the typical Bedouin meal called Mansaf. I must look it up on the Web. In very veiled speech he told us we should take all our valuables with us, not leaving anything on the coach. We should not leave anything on the jeeps we would be using later in the day. Equally, although we could take photos of Bedouin men, with permission, taking photos of Bedouin women was a severe breach of etiquette. As it turned out, no Bedouin females made an appearance, unless the cat was female.

We were on the Desert Highway and the succession of small towns were rough cinder block buildings in pretty rough shape. There was little evidence of any attempt to beautify the homes. We saw one windmill that is being tested to pump water up from the aquifer for the Bedouins.

Education was discussed briefly. Seven percent of the population is illiterate – mainly Bedouin. A Bedouin boy can make \$ 6,000 per month at Petra working camels in the tourist trade – there is not logical reason to go to school and miss out on this income.

Education is not free in Jordan. A public school will cost about 3-400 dollars per year while a private school goes up to 3-5,000 dollars per annum.

English is now the most taught second language, while French is the third. There are 32 universities in the country.

At 12:10 we were quite a bit south going through the town on Ma'an. In olden days there were springs in the area but they have since dried up. We were into an area called the Negev, just like in Israel.

We were just over 5,000 feet when we came to the edge of the plateau and started descending to the valley floor at 3,000 feet. The view was magnificent and the camera went wild with excitement.

At 13:05 we turned off the Desert Highway, where we advised to SPEED DOWN, and headed east to Wadi Rum. Soon we were into the nature reserve where attempts are being made to restock the area with the Oryx, with help from the San Diego zoo.

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Wadi Rum is a special area where you can sleep in a million star Bedouin tent rather than a five star Hilton. There are 20-25 such overnight camps. Tour operators offer hot air balloon rides and hang gliding.

At 13:30 we were at the restaurant complex, although most if it was closed due to the holidays. I skipped lunch and went onto the patio to take photos of the huge rock formation called the Seven Pillars, from which T.E. Lawrence drew the title of his book.

It was hot in the sun, but like Perth, Australia, once you get into the shade it becomes more reasonable. By the way, we were at 29 degrees north. Also, Wadi Rum means Valley with High Mountains. We paused on the narrow gauge railroad track that Lawrence liked to blow up.

After lunch we got into seven Toyota trucks with six per truck. It was ludicrous as grandmothers had to clamber over the tailgates of the trucks. The drivers offered no assistance – wonder if that was a cultural thing.

We stopped at 15:15 to look at rock drawings. This was a key stop on the old caravan route that went to the Sinai Peninsular, through the Gaza Strip and into Egypt. I think they were Nabatean drawings.

We drove on to my highlight of the day. We spent time in the very gorge where Lawrence of Arabia had hidden the horses and camels before he struck at Aqaba from the desert in 1916.

After photographing the monument to Lawrence and Prince Abdullah, we went to a Bedouin encampment to take tea. The tea was highly spiced with sage, cardamon and cinnamon. It was all a setup for a buying opportunity. The Tour Manager smeared us with musk and other smellies. The ladies liked the things on offer and I was tempted by a Bedouin head scarf, but passed.

It would appear that the head scarf says certain things. Red and white indicates Bedouin while black and white is more northern. Seems to me that Arafat wore black and white. The material is about one metre square and there is quite a technique to wrapping it around the head. Women can only wrap it, while men can use the double band of “rope” to hold it in place. The tilt of the rope indicates whether the man is married.

After cruising on the rough desert for a while I understood why the Toyota has become the new ship of the desert.

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We departed at 17:15 and by 17:45 the light was providing great National Geographic shots. By 18:00 we were climbing north back onto the five thousand foot ASL plateau and soon turned west off the Desert Highway onto the King's Way. By 18:10 I was getting fantastic sunset shots – I just blasted away from the opposite side of the coach hoping to get the money shot.

After topping out at 5,229 feet, we slid down into the village of Ragiff. In Arabic it means shivering and it is the coldest village in Jordan.

I was thankful when we stopped at hotel after 450 kms of travel. I was more than happy to see my bag waiting at the front desk.

At 19:30 we had a buffet dinner. Afterwards I did laundry, charged batteries and wrote the blog.