

INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL

A Tribal Thing

Journeying through Jordan with Bedouins

text and photos by Mark Godfrey

It was noon when we left the King Hussein Bridge – the border crossing with Israel – and headed into Jordan. Our taxi driver, panting and limping in a bulging kameez, said he'd take us to Petra for 300 dinars (RMB 3,200). Constantly uttering his only word of English – “okay” – a kind of half-question, half-assurance, he got us as far as a drizzly back street in Amman, the capital of Jordan, after a 30-minute drive. We waited, confused, while curious locals checked out the foreigners.

Then a portly Arab in Western-style clothes suddenly stuck a neatly coiffed head in the window and began spouting a potpourri of English and Russian. It was Turki, our driver for the remainder of the journey to Petra. We agreed on a rough itinerary of better-known sites, starting with the ancient city itself. But the itinerary soon went out the window. Turki's time was not money: he was seeking tea and friendship. His family is Palestinian, and had crossed into Jordan to seek solace during these turbulent times. Sensing we were interested in his story, he gradually began to fill in the blanks.

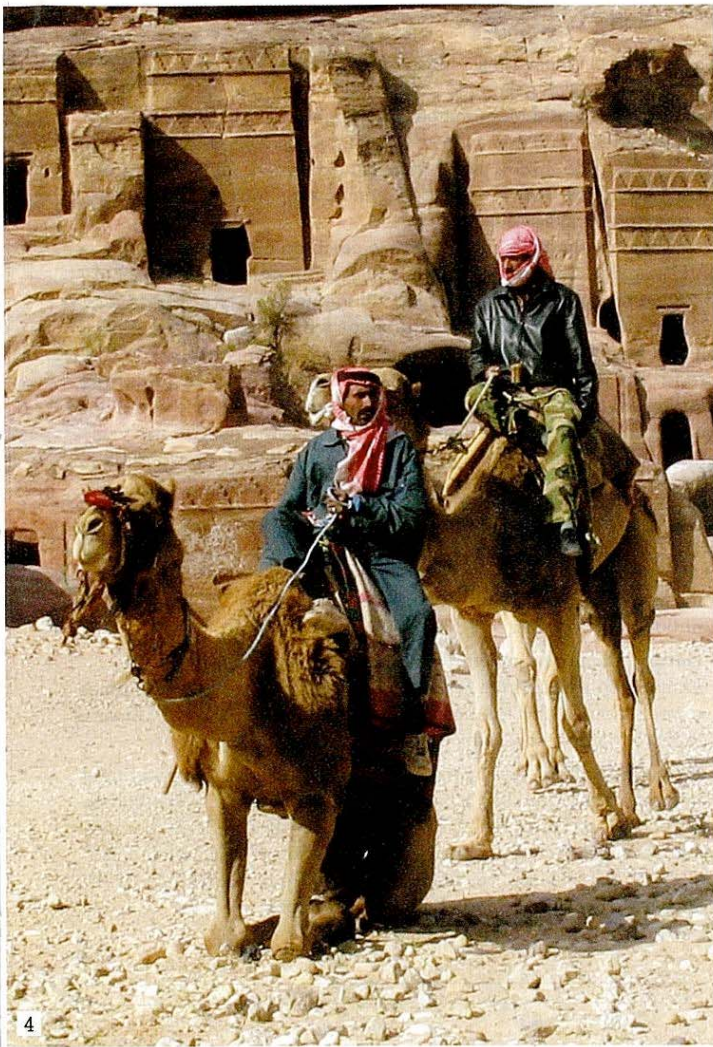
Commonly romanticized as desert nomads – they even merit a mention in the U2 song *It's a Beautiful Day* – Bedouin clans have long herded their way across Arabic lands from Lebanon to Libya. Turki's

father used to drive his goats from Amman to Petra, a journey that took him a year, stopping wherever the grazing was best. Turki himself now makes the journey several times a week. Driving his silver Hyundai saloon, the portly Bedouin takes his time getting there, as we found out.

First stop was Turki senior's tent on a plain about 40km from Amman, a tent which moves according to wherever his 30 sheep have

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grass and water. Turki was dressed in an immaculately ironed marine blue shirt with shoulder straps and dark blue slacks. With his neat goatee he looked like an Arab colonel missing his stars. But his father still wore the ankle-length thawb, or kameez, worn for centuries by Arab men, accessorized with a Western-style overcoat to keep him warm. He was soon gone, prowling along behind the bleating goats, his red-white keffiyeh headdress held neatly in place by a black band.




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1. Guarding the ancient city
2. A Jordanian Bedouin
3. The Treasury of Petra
4. Camel trekkers ready to dismount

Bedouins respect their elders, and explain their family ancestry with easy fluency. Like 30-something Turki however, they enjoy the prosperity that Jordan's economy has brought. A free-trade pact with Singapore has brought an industrial park within sight of the family's goats. Perhaps the new factory jobs explained why Turki senior's tent was strung together from industrial-issue polythene and canvas sacking rather than the goat or camel hair that traditionally kept Bedouins warm during the cold desert nights.


For the younger generations, tents have given way to concrete and roof tiles, as we discovered when Turki took us to his home. The smell of paint and fresh mortar still hung in the air as we lounged on the mattresses in his common room. There was no TV, and a fine carpet rather than pictures hung on the wall. A son dragged his plastic sandals about as he served tea, while Turki produced a stack of naan bread and yoghurt churned from a milking of the family goats.

The house is the first concrete structure in Turki's family history, he shyly explained. Unlike the free-moving flock of his father, Turki's own goats and sheep stay on the same field, 90km from the Iraqi border. His four children go to school. Bundled up in a green woolen sweater, his giggling three-year-old daughter stared nervously at the




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foreigners through huge brown eyes before tumbling onto a reclining Turki, taking delight in fishing into her father's shirt pockets for dinars and sweets.

Jordan may lack the vast oilfields of its neighbors, but the visa-free tourism deal with Singapore and earnings from American activity in the region have helped pay for highways crossing the country. As night neared, the glow of the desert and a setting sun played on the green domes of white-walled mosques along the highway. A Bedouin folk singer sang a melancholic religious homage on the tape deck. It lost its otherworldliness after an hour on repeat but by then the lights

One of the Bedouins we met, Mohammed, explained how he'd built a house to move his family out of a succession of caves

of Petra had appeared, after a three-hour drive.

We met Mahdy Nawafleh in Petra. He proffered several phone numbers and e-mail addresses, as well as msn and skype details. The stocky, tanned Bedouin wore a baseball cap to cover his baldness and promised us an unforgettable image of Petra if we joined him at dawn for a guided tour. He didn't disappoint. For six hours in the early morning coldness he walked us through the highlights of this ancient city, made famous by Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade.

In the noon sun, Mahdy left us with a group of donkey-driving friends in the hills overlooking Petra. All was quiet but for the sand cats and desert foxes seeking, or avoiding becoming, prey among the towering mountains. As we traipsed through the moonlike landscape, colored in shades of red, yellow, and orange, one of the Bedouins we met, Mohammed, explained how he'd built a house to move his family out of a succession of caves.

With their knowledge of every cave and cranny of the Jordanian terrain, Bedouins are doing nicely from the renewed inflow of tourists.

The industry is recovering following the post-9/11 travel wariness, a slack period which prompted some to emigrate. "My uncle drives a taxi in Zurich," said Mohammed, who hadn't learned to read - but he assured us that he knew how to count. A sturdy donkey is worth 200 dinars (RMB 2,180), the 24-year-old explained. The fact that we each had to pay USD 10 for our 90-minute ride back into town helped explain the beasts' value.

Before heading back to Amman to catch an airplane we took Turki's advice and bought a couple of colorful rugs from a Bedouin weaving family he knew in a small village near the city. Our driver chatted with truckers at the next table as we ate a farewell meal of mutton and vegetable stew, mopped up with naan-like maglouba bread. The drivers were setting out on a ten-hour drive to Baghdad. Meanwhile, school kids drifted back to a crowded refugee camp housing some of the 1.4 million locally-based Palestinians. Our trip was ending but it seemed like the journeys of the whole Arab world began and ended in Jordan. ■

Travel Tips

Visas: Visas are available on arrival at Amman's Queen Alia International Airport and cost 10 Jordanian dinars (RMB 109).

Getting there and around: Emirates flies daily from Beijing to Amman via Dubai (from RMB 7,700). Qatar Airways flies four times a week from Beijing to Amman via Qatar (from RMB 7,640). Amman to Petra takes 3-4 hours by car.

Accommodation: The Sydney Hostel on Prince Mohammad Street in Amman charges USD 20 per person for a twin room. The Palace Hotel on King Faisal Street offers twin rooms from USD 20 per person per night. In Petra, a twin room at the Petra Moon hotel (+962 3215 6220) costs USD 50, while Mövenpick Petra (+962 3215 7111) charges USD 150 per night for a standard room.

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