

# ROAD TO JORDAN

*WITH WILD, OTHERWORLDLY LANDSCAPES AND SWANKY ECO-LODGES,  
JORDAN IS TRANSFORMING THE MEANING OF DESERT ADVENTURE*

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**T**he journey to the long-lost city of Petra is truly a flight of fancy. As we drive along the deserted, dizzyingly steep mountain roads of the Desert Highway, it feels eerily apocalyptic, like we've reached the world's end. There isn't a living soul for miles – aside from a scattering of goats, lone shepherds and swooping vultures.

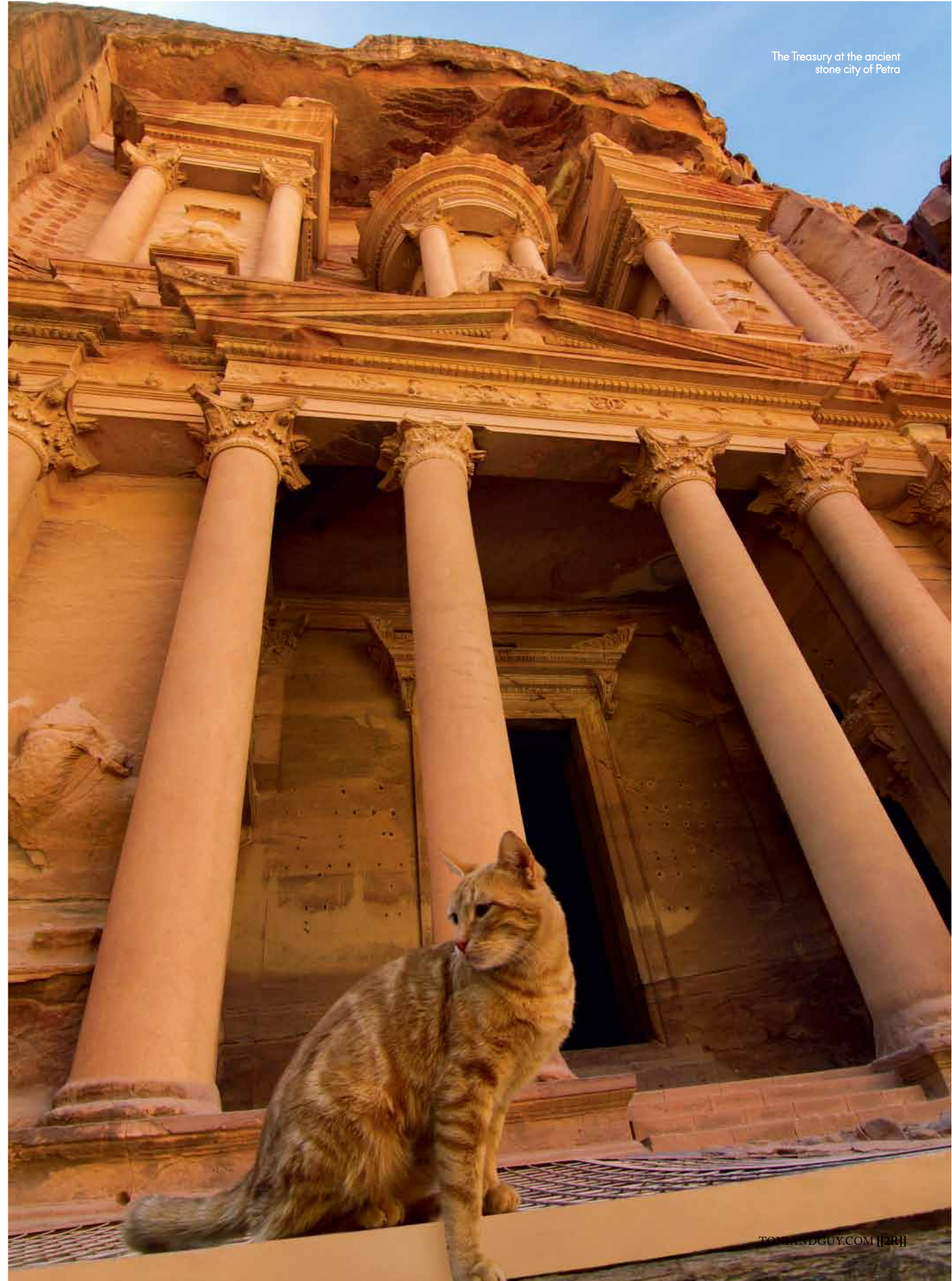
We're on our way to Feynan Ecolodge and losing hope of ever finding it. Snaking along the coast for hours as the sun starts to fade, we're not even sure we're still in Jordan. There are road signs for Israel and Iraq, army checkpoints and tanks and not much else. At last, a small tin hut appears on the roadside like a mirage. Inside, there's a man with a traditional *keffiyeh* wrapped around his head and shining blue eyes like the devil. He's selling coffee, the finest brew on the Desert Highway, he says, which turns out to be sugary Nescafe. 'Are there any petrol stations around?' my husband Tiz asks. 'No. Only falafel and coffee,' he replies starkly. 'You don't want to fall asleep and take the wrong roads, you might end up in Baghdad. Or Israel. Then you really got trouble, my friend.' As the rogue coffee trader waves us off, I have visions of being stranded in this lonely stretch of wasteland. Then, a few miles on, a flash of green appears. Palm trees. We're at the entrance of the Dana National Park, except we're at the wrong end and running low on petrol.

With fewer untamed places left in the world, Feynan is a rare find in the middle of nowhere. Just finding this hidden hand-built lodge in the desert is an adventure. To get here, we have to navigate our way through sand storms, scud past car-chasing wild dogs and stray camels appearing out of nowhere and deal with sword and Kalashnikov-carrying soldiers in the checkpoints who force you to stop only to ask where you're from and for small talk and tea. But it's a small price to pay for sheer remoteness in a still-untouched corner in this sliver of a country.

Following the occasional signposts, sprouting out of the gathering blackness, we are met by a driver in a 4WD who whisks us to the lodge along rough-hewn, dirt roads – the whole area, we later discover, is scattered with Bedouin families in what is Jordan's largest nature reserve.

Arriving at dusk, the sight of a shimmering sandstone fortress lit by hundreds of candles is wildly romantic. Run by a local Bedouin tribe, Feynan operates almost entirely on solar power. The retreat is a warren of flickering chambers, cosy sitting areas and courtyards and a cushion-strewn roof terrace for stargazing.

The next morning, after a breakfast of yogurt and baked bread, one of the guides Mahmoud al Nawasreh takes us walking on the canyons for a glimpse of the copper moonscape of Wadi, described as 'vast, echoing and God-like' by T.E. Lawrence (the British officer who later became the fabled Lawrence of Arabia).





Feynan Ecolodge in Dana National Park



RSCN's Azraq Wetland Reserve; BELOW the native Sinai lizards in Dana Nature Reserve



'Look at this beetle,' Mahmoud marvels, pausing to observe a scabbling, metallic-green insect. 'One of the survivors of the recent wildfires.' He points out other miniature life, a red crab scuttling past, the elusive sky-blue Sinai lizard clinging to a blade of holly. 'They're not rare, but it's good karma to see one,' says Mahmoud, who grew up in these mountains. He is not your average park ranger, but a preserver of knowledge, of birds and animals, of flash floods and earthquakes and of ancient history. He shows us caves he'd lived in, wolf and hyena tracks, how to find water and plants for making shampoo and toothpaste. Stopping in the shade of sparse acacias, he starts a fire and brews mint tea on the rocks and tells us how he spent his days as a child herding the family's goats along the precarious cliffs, avoiding poisonous snakes and scorpions. 'You see that,' he says of the cute, chubby squirrel-like creatures on the distant cliffs. 'Those are rock hyrax. I used to shoot them for supper when I was a boy, but now we conserve them.' Mahmoud now lives with his wife in a flat and works for the RSCN, Jordan's Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature.

After a tour of prehistoric copper mines, Byzantine churches and Nabatean ruins, Mahmoud takes us to meet his family, who still live in the desert. We share tea and the hottest, freshest bread in a Bedouin tent, play with the children, the pet cats and baby goats, who all sleep in the tents with the family. It's a precious insight to see what life is like for the modern nomads who carry phones and drive cars.

In the evening, everyone staying at the lodge shares a communal vegetarian meal and conversation surrounded by stars and the silence of the Shara Mountains. After dinner, there's sweet-mint tea and cakes in the candlelit library. We share stories with a rich, middle-aged American couple who tell us about their adventures of being kidnapped by bandits in Mexico, getting lost at sea off the Kenyan coast and seeing UFOs in the Utah desert; our own travel tales of walking in the Kalahari Desert with full-grown lions and being chased by a Ugandan mad man with an AK-47 for taking pictures seem tame. It's an extraordinary otherworld – time seems to move in slow motion,

after a day or two here, you feel like you've been away for weeks.

At sunrise, after being woken by doves nesting outside our window and coffee in the courtyard, we resume our road trip to Petra, driving across the most desolate waterless terrain. From the entrance gates, this lost kingdom is nearly an hour's walk. Winding our way down between the immense canyon walls, we slowly see the Treasury rising from the sands. Petra is intoxicating: it's literally carved into the rose-gold cliff faces of the Great Rift Valley. The once thriving capital of the ancient Nabataean Empire lay forgotten for centuries. The Bedouin still buzz around their ancestral home, peddling camel rides, coffee with cardamom and trinkets under embroidered canopies, while goats and donkeys graze in the scrubby slopes.

After a long day climbing 1,200 steps to the ruinous Petra Monastery in the 40-degree heat, we leave Petra at sundown,

encountering white camels and more wild dogs along the way. The descent down along the Dead Sea roads is amazing - dropping 1,000m in about 15kms.

We spend the night at Evason Ma'In Six Senses Spa, half an hour from the Dead Sea shore. Lying 264 metres below sea level in a lush-green oasis at the bottom of a rocky canyon, the Spa is like a secluded Arabian palace. Appealingly sparse and unstuffy, it has a monastic feel – you half expect to hear chanting from the windows, instead you hear desert foxes and birds of prey outside. Lit by candles, it has cavernous rooms and secret cellars and semi-wild cats prowling the corridors, meowing and screeching. The evening disappears in the warm orange glow of the restaurant, where we sit watching the sand storms swirling outside and feeding the wandering resident cats, part of a 60-odd colony who live on the grounds of the spa and are fed by the staff.

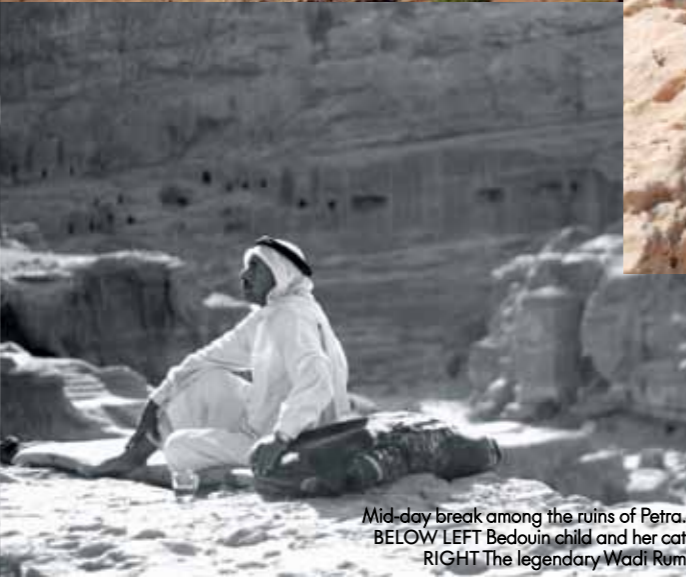


Salt formations at the Dead Sea

The sulphurous, mineral-rich waterfalls lure travellers and weekend locals to come here to check out or soak in the hot springs, which are mysteriously closed. Not that we care. We came for the warm sea breezes and drama of the desert. Few places offer peace and solitude like the desert.

We're back to where we started in Amman. Like Rome, the city was originally built on seven hills and walking along its high, sloping streets is like wading through a giant sugar bowl. We get lost looking for Rainbow Street – asking a taxi driver to take us there, he refuses and warns us to 'never go there. It is bad. Full of naked girls and misbehaving young people.' Just off the 1st circle, the newly hip Rainbow and Mango Streets, with their cobbled lanes and 20s villas, are loaded with cool little boutiques, eateries, bookshops and art galleries tumbling down the hillside.

A desert adventure should end racing across the canyons on horses, but ours ends in a tree-shaded falafel hole-in-the-wall, listening to the mosques call to sunset prayers and watching the trendy young locals and ex-pats buzzing around the sugar-cube architecture. Feynan Ecolodge B&B, from £70; Evason Ma'In Six Senses Spa, from £300; bmi flies between London Heathrow and Amman daily (flybmi.com) ●



Mid-day break among the ruins of Petra. BELOW LEFT Bedouin child and her cat RIGHT The legendary Wadi Rum



The winding, desolate Dead Sea Road; BELOW Roadside coffee seller on the Desert Highway FAR RIGHT Ma'In Hot Springs at Six Senses Spa

