

Traveling with Jewish Taste®

Jordan: 'To Be Seen Before You Die' ...Try Not to Miss The Donkey

By Carol Goodman Kaufman



The weather outside my window is now cold and damp, the skies gray, but memories of a recent trip to Jordan have me feeling quite warm – and not just because of the unseasonably hot weather we encountered while there.

Joel and I traveled not only to explore what *Smithsonian Magazine* has deemed one of the “28 Places to See Before You Die,” but also because while the ancient Nabatean site of Petra is the most popular tourist site in Jordan the country Jordan offers other attractions that the one-day visitor crossing at Eilat misses.

In Biblical times much of what is now known as Jordan was home to the Israelite tribes of Reuben, Gad, and Menasheh, and several key events in our people’s history took place there. Frankly, both the topography of the land and its inhabitants look as they must have in those days. Bedouin tents and shepherds leading their flocks dot a stark and rocky landscape.

We started our adventure at the Sheik Hussein crossing, near Lake Kinneret. The further we drove into Jordan, the more dramatic the hills became. In stark contrast to the lush green of Israel’s Jezreel Valley, the undulating Jordanian hills are enormous, gray, and breathtaking.

Our first stop was at Jerash, one of the ten Roman “Decapolis” cities, of which Jordan has six. A strong earthquake in the 8th century destroyed large parts of Jerash, and wars added to the mess.

It wasn’t until the beginning of the 19th century that archaeological excavations started to uncover the treasures buried under centuries of rubble. From a pile of stones calling themselves steps, we entered the city through the 2nd century Arch of Hadrian and found an almost fully excavated site.

Among the highlights: a large oval forum and a majestic colonnaded *Cardo Maximus* with intimidating tall columns; an amphitheater whose ornate stage set holds four-thousand people and is today the site of the annual Jerash Festival of Culture and Arts; and an ancient synagogue whose detailed mosaics includes one depicting the story of Noah.

After a restful night in Amman, we rose bright and early the next morning to head south. Our first stop was at Madaba, where the Byzantine church of St. George houses a 6th century floor mosaic of the Holy Land and Jerusalem. Its restored remains span over eight-hundred square feet. Unlike modern maps that are oriented north, it faces east in such a way that points on the map coincide with actual compass directions.

The town of Madaba has made good use of its proximity to the church by developing a thriving industry in mosaic work. The Madaba workshop employs disabled people who work in both mosaic and marquetry.

We watched workers manipulating tweezers and pasting on both small pictures and entire walls. Others were adorning pieces of furniture with tiny pieces of wood. Joel and I were sorely tempted by a marquetry game table with moving parts – that is, until we saw the price tag.

From Madaba we continued south until Mount Nebo. As recorded in the Torah, Mount Nebo is the site from which Moses was afforded his only look at the land promised by God to the Jews.

Then Moses climbed Mount

Nebo from the plains of Moab to the top of Pisgah, across from Jericho. There the Lord showed him the whole land. Then the Lord said to him, “This is the land I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob when I said, ‘I will give it to your descendants. I have let you see it with your eyes, but you will not cross over into it.

And Moses the servant of the Lord died there in Moab, as the Lord had said. He buried him in Moab, in the valley opposite Beth Pe’or, but to this day on one knows where his grave is. – Deuteronomy 34:1-6

Although there is some scholarly dispute as to the location of the “real” Mount Nebo, this site does provide a fantastic panoramic view of the area. Situated at an altitude of about 3,000 feet, on a clear day you can see the Dead Sea, Jericho, Jerusalem, and the Jordan River Valley.

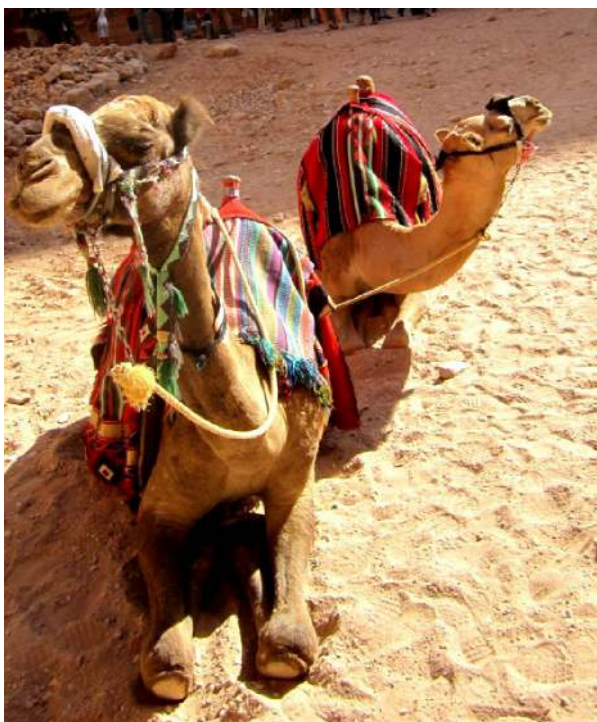
The site is now owned by the Franciscans, who operate it as a monastery. Remains of a Byzantine era basilica incorporate the modern Memorial Church of Moses, and beautiful mosaics of several time periods decorate the floors and walls.

Apparently, Moses wasn’t the only one hidden on the mountain. According to the Second Book of Maccabees, 2:4-7, the Prophet Jeremiah secreted the tabernacle and the Ark of the Covenant in a cave there.

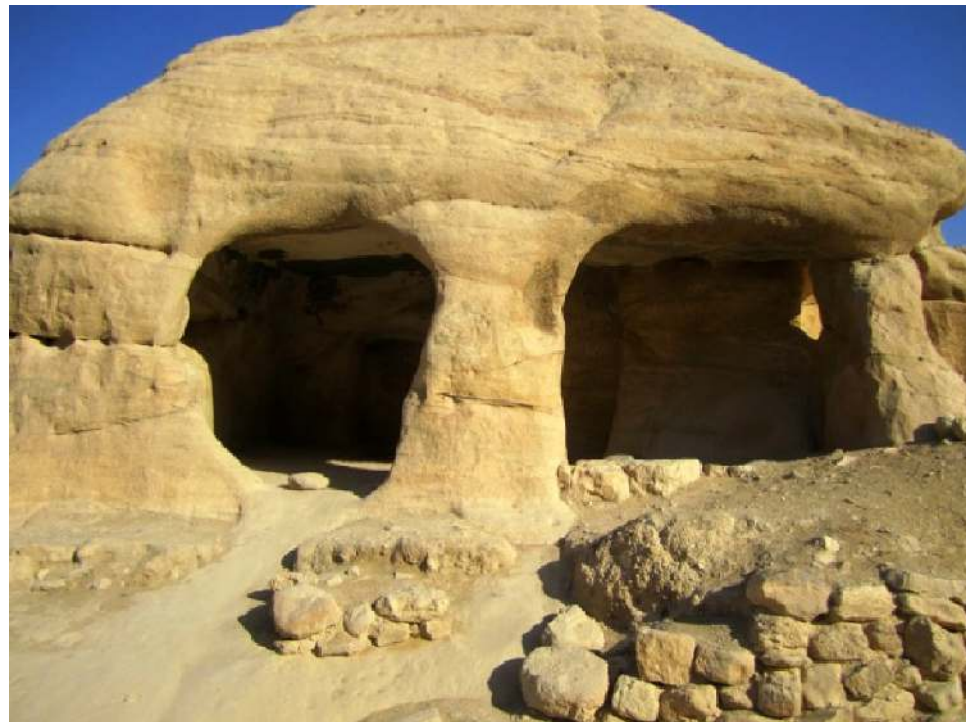
And, then there’s piece de resistance. Established as early as the 4th century BCE by the Nabateans, Petra lies on the slope of Mount Hor in a large valley running from the Dead Sea to the Gulf of Aqaba. Its place on the caravan routes made it a popular destination.



Excavations at Jerash



Camels along the way



A Nabatean Dwelling Cave In Petra



Chocolate-eyed donkeys steal hearts



One of a very many Bedouin tents

Petra is most famous for its architecture cut right out of the rock, and less so for its water conduit system. But it is that system (one for humans and one for animals, both covered to keep the water clean) that allowed the civilization to live there in relative health and security. And the Nabateans did just that until the Romans found their water source and blocked it. It then remained hidden until 1812, when a Swiss explorer named Burckhardt discovered it.

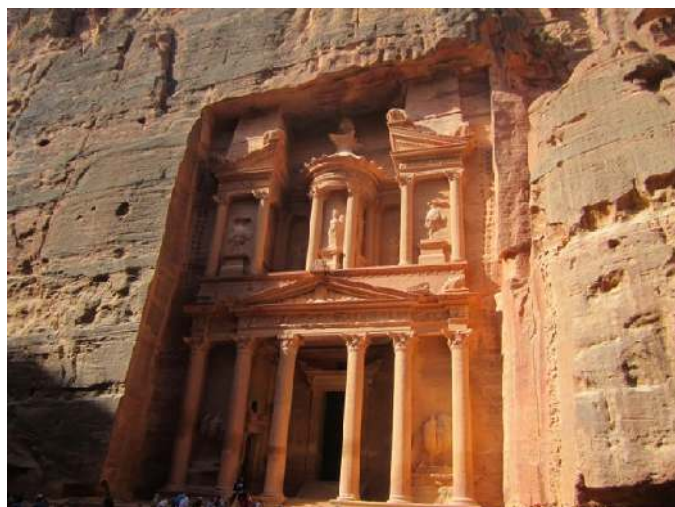
Tradition holds that it was at Petra that Moses struck the rock to obtain water for his wandering Jews after the escape from Egypt. In fact, Moses is so closely identified with Petra that the valley running through the ancient settlement is called “Wadi Musa.”

The approach to the main “square” of Petra is a long, very narrow passageway. We walked steadily down through this “siq,” a robin’s egg blue sky visible only as a thin ribbon in the space between the towering rock walls. We passed camels and small shrines carved into the rock, while horses and donkey-pulled carts passed us, carrying visitors not up for

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the hike.

And suddenly, around a corner, we came upon the most famous façade of all, the giant rose-red Treasury glowing in the sunlight. Now, "Indiana Jones" had led me to believe that the Treasury was a large building, dug deep into the mountain. The reality is that the area behind the façade is shallow, no more than twenty feet deep. And what's more, the structure isn't a treasury at all. It's a burial chamber, as is every other beautifully carved façade at the expansive settlement. – the carved decorations at the top of the so-called Treasury are marred by bullet holes made by treasure hunters who believed a legend that gold was hidden inside them.



The Treasury at Petra

The Nabatean people actually dwelled in the caves, as did Bedouin until 1983, when the Jordanian government resettled them to housing in the nearby village so that it could exploit the archaeological site for tourism.

And, they have done a bang-up job of it, Petra being the most popular tourist site in Jordan. A spanking new visitor center is now under construction, and should open soon.

Despite the thousands of tourists visiting the day we were there, at several points on our way back through the "siq," Joel and I found ourselves completely alone in blissful quiet, a gentle breeze our only company.

After leaving Petra, we drove to the Shoebak Crusader castle, set on a rocky hill amidst a barren and desolate landscape. Why we were brought here is a mystery, since we couldn't enter the site still being restored.

King Baldwin I of Jerusalem built the castle in the early 12th century, during his campaign to capture Aqaba on the Red Sea. He chose the site due to its location on the plain of Edom, along pilgrimage and caravan routes. However, it being in a prize location, Saladin's armies captured it by the end of the same century.

Although we couldn't gain access to the castle, we did have an experience that I imagine could have happened in "Lawrence of Arabia."

While we stood gazing at the castle, a young Bedouin shepherd appeared suddenly out of the hills. Accompanied by a donkey and two dogs, he was leading a flock of sheep to market in anticipation of the upcoming Muslim festival of Eid al-Adha, the Festival of the Sacrifice.

While my fellow travelers were busy photographing two randy rams fighting over the same ewe, I stood at the back of the group. Out of the corner of my eye appeared a brown spot. As I turned to look, a lone brown donkey trotted over a hill and directly into my arms, where he began to nuzzle me – and former Berkshire resident Sydelle



The narrow "siq" at Petra



At a Madaba mosaic workshop



The stage at Jerash

Kubbeh

Mezze is a selection of small dishes served all over the Middle East and the Mediterranean. A typical mezze platter consists of hummus, kubbeh, ful medames, baba ghanoush, tabbouleh, olives, and pickles. My all-time favorite item on the mezze platter is the kubbeh, redolent of Middle Eastern flavors and fragrances. I have very fond memories of the torpedo-shaped kubbeh prepared by a friend's mother in Jerusalem decades ago and occasionally submit to cravings despite the *patchke* involved in preparation. The following is an easy – easier – recipe than most.



Makes 18 Pieces

Ingredients:

2 pounds finely ground beef divided into one-and-a-half and one-half pound pieces
1/2 pound medium grain bulghur wheat
1 teaspoon of salt, plus one-half teaspoon
1-1/2 teaspoons pepper, divided
1 teaspoon allspice

1/4 teaspoon cumin
2 medium onions – one finely chopped, one coarsely chopped, divided
1/2 cup toasted pine nuts
2 tablespoons olive oil
Vegetable oil for frying

Directions:

- In a medium bowl, soak wheat for thirty minutes in cold water.
- Remove and drain. Squeeze out excess water through several layers of paper towel.
- Place into medium bowl and combine with one and a half pounds of the meat, coarsely chopped onion, one teaspoon of salt and 1 teaspoon of the pepper.
- Combine well and place small amount in food processor until dough-like in consistency – you may do this by hand if you have the time.
- Place mixture aside, covered.

For Kibbeh Stuffing:

- In a medium frying pan, sauté the finely chopped onion in olive oil.
- Add the toasted pine nuts.
- Add one-half ground beef and chop well with wooden spoon or spatula.
- Add allspice, remaining salt and pepper, and cumin.
- Once beef is light brown, remove from heat. Allow to cool for ten minutes.

Assembling the Kubbeh:

- Take an egg sized amount of shell mixture and form into a ball.
- With your finger, poke a hole in the ball, making a space for filling.
- Add filling and pinch the top to seal the ball. Shape it into a football.
- Fry in 350 degree oil on stove top or in deep fryer for about 10 minutes or until golden brown.
- Drain on paper towels.
- Enjoy, and remember to share.



The forum at Jerash

Roth brought him an apple, which he gobbled right up.

This creature was so beautiful, so gentle, and so friendly that I fell in love. For all the UNESCO world heritage sites in Jordan, I will always remember that beautiful donkey with the big chocolate eyes as the highlight of my visit.

Carol Goodman Kaufman is a psychologist and author with a passion for travel and food. She recently launched the blog "Food for Thought," on her website at carolgoodmankaufman.com. She invites visits and comments.

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