

THE KING'S HIGHWAY THROUGH JORDAN

BY GRAHAM HOWE



We went looking for adventure on the King's Highway, the trans-Jordanian route travelled by spice caravans, merchants, pilgrims, crusaders, armies and explorers for over two thousand years. This ancient thoroughfare winds along a line of freshwater springs on a ridge of mountains through the Jordan Rift Valley, linking the Sea of Galilee, the Dead Sea and the Red Sea.

The King's Highway runs through some of the finest classical sites of antiquity. We set out from Hadrian's triumphal arch at the Roman city of Jarash, heading south via the sanctuary of Mt Nebo where Moses was shown the promised land, onto the crusader castle of Karak, the pink city of Petra and Wadi Rum, forever linked to Lawrence of Arabia.

The citadel of Jabal al-Qala is the heart of the ancient city of Amman, capital of Jordan. Rising 850 metres above sea-level, the terraces afford magnificent views. It stood at the crossroads of the ancient pilgrim route between Damascus and Mecca. The citadel museum houses a great collection of artefacts from Antiquity.

The amphitheatre is one of Amman's grand classical monuments. Completed in the second century AD by Marcus Aurelius, the Roman theatre has excellent acoustics, still keeps the sunlight out of the eyes of an audience of 6000 and is used for dance, theatre and music today. Climbing the grand stone staircases is a great way to work off jet-lag before visiting the museums of folklore with their magnificent mosaics.

Travelling through olive groves, lemon orchards and vineyards, we reached the ruins of Jarash, one of the best-preserved provincial Roman cities in the Middle East. Two thousand years ago, it was one of the ten cities of the Decapolis in the Roman Province of Syria. You could spend an entire day strolling around all the temples, theatres, baths, chapels, a synagogue, markets and the *Cardo* – a long colonnaded street. Leaving via Hadrian's Arch, a massive monument, we set out south.

The King's Highway swings south to Madaba - a town famous for its giant mosaic map of the Holy Land in the Church of St George. Pilgrims come from all over the world to see the 6th century map which depicts "the territories of the tribes of Israel" and all the major Christian shrines and churches, from Jerusalem to Jericho.

We ascend the steep road to Moses Memorial Church on Mt Nebo, a place of pilgrimage perched high above the Dead Sea and the Jordan Rift Valley. The Old Testament records Moses was shown the Promised Land from these heights. The King's Highway passes through an ancient biblical landscape - and plunges into the spectacular gorge of Wadi Mujib. Welcome to Jordan's Grand Canyon.

We crossed wadi after wadi, magnificent dry river valleys running from the Jordanian plateau down into the desert. Wadi Musa is gateway to the ancient pink city of Petra - voted one of the new seven wonders of the world in mid-2007. Walking along the narrow magical gorge is like passing through Alice's looking-glass into wonderland. We wander spellbound in the vast mountain stronghold of the Nabatean kings who grew fabulously wealthy on the frankincense and myrrh trade two.

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