



# Echoes in the desert

Climbing in Jordan's Wadi Rum brings connection with the traditions of the Bedouin and reminders of the more ancient peoples that once roamed this region.

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I COULD HEAR THE DESPERATION.

“Oh no!” said Antoine, as he hung spectacularly, 15m above me. His right hand, rolled into a fist, was jammed into a five-centimetre-deep crack, together with his right foot. His full body weight dangled from those precarious holds, while with his left hand he was urgently trying to loosen a cam from the crack.

“I just moved it a few centimetres higher and now it’s stuck,” he tried to apologise.

A camelot, or cam for short, is a spring-loaded safety device that climbers squeeze into small cracks to protect against a fall. We only had a limited number with us and it was important we got this one free. It was also the only safety that currently protected Antoine from falling back down to our anchor and possibly down the entire route. From my own, more secure perch, I could see the desert floor several hundred metres below us.

“I guess there is not much we can do to help,” my wife Esther, sharing the anchor with me, said drily.

I could see the tension in her face but we both trusted in Antoine’s abilities. We had been

climbing with him for more than two years. One of France’s most proficient alpinists, he has won the Piolet D’Or, mountaineering’s highest award and climbed remote peaks in Patagonia and Greenland. It had been his idea to join him on this trip, an exploration of the scrambling and climbing routes in Jordan’s famous Wadi Rum, a dramatic system of valleys in the Southern Desert of Jordan.

The minutes passed with the faint noise of French cursing continuing until we heard a loud, “Ah yes, got it out.” With a few dynamic moves he continued up the crack over the last remaining metres of wall and just a few moments later we joined him at the top.

I had visited Wadi Rum once before. In 2005 I embarked on a road trip through the Middle East, back when Syria was still safe to travel. Having to do it on the cheap, I rented a small car and ventured into the desert but soon got stuck in the desert sand. A party of Bedouin in a ramshackle Land Rover pulled me out and offered to show me their homeland. I remember walking between stunning beehives of layered sandstone, through natural arches and up the face of dunes

the colour of honey or blood depending on the time of day. Even then the steep cliffs seemed to be an obvious magnet for climbers, but I hadn’t the time to join them. Thirteen years later, I was finally back. Together with Esther and Antoine I was there to test our skills on ancient climbing routes and enjoy Bedouin hospitality.

Wadi Rum has been inhabited since prehistory with different cultures having left us rock paintings and petroglyphs – ancient graffiti – daubed on the rock. Some of these relics, along with temples and other structures, date back to the Nabateans, a people that controlled wide areas of the Arabian peninsula until they were swallowed up by the Roman empire in 100BC. Their capital was long-lost Petra, today Jordan’s most famous attraction, whose delicate rock-cut temples in rose sandstone are an unmissable sight on any exploration of the country.

Wadi Rum is best known for its connection with the British Army officer, T. E. Lawrence, who passed through here several times during the Arab Revolt in World War I. He famously described his first impressions of Wadi Rum: “We looked up to the left to a long wall of rock,

sheering in like a thousand-foot wave towards the middle of the valley; whose other arc, to the right, was an opposing line of steep, red, broken hills.”

While it was camel’s back in Lawrence’s day, today 4WD vehicles are the usual beasts of burden, ferrying tourists about on day trips to the desert or up to the ancient Nabataean ruins of Petra, just an hour’s drive away.

The highest jebel, the Arabic term for mountain, is Jebel Rum, the second highest mountain in Jordan. It towers to more than 750m, dominating Rum village, a typical threadbare-looking desert settlement. Despite Wadi Rum’s burgeoning tourism industry, no hotels have been built here. There are only one- or two-storey buildings, and the roads are roamed by camels and old trucks that have seen many better days. Tourists opt instead for luxury camps out in the sands, drawn by the romance of a night sky far beyond the taint of modern streetlights.

Luxury was definitely absent from our accommodation. We shared a basic room with a few other Austrian climbers. The toilet, a hole in the ground, doubles as shower and the mosquitoes were almost queuing up to take turns to show their preference for European blood. What was missing in comfort though was made up for by traditional desert hospitality.

The graciousness and bearing of the Bedouin lived on in Atayek, our host, who stood slim and tall in the doorway, wearing his traditional white dishdasha with a red-and-white chequered headscarf. He has been helping climbers and tourists in the area for decades.

He is also the father of six lovely girls who cause havoc around the premises, especially when Antoine tried to teach them slacklining. We all fell on the home cooking of Atayek’s wife with relish: labneh – a kind of thick yoghurt – with flatbread and zaatar, or herbs, for breakfast; roast chicken, chickpeas and rice for dinner. It was enough to satisfy the hunger of even the most exhausted adventurer.

“Take a good map, lots of people have got lost! And start very early.” Atayek was excited that we are attempting one of the old Bedouin routes, the West-East Traverse of Jebel Rum. For hundreds of years locals have been venturing deep into the jebel and most of those around Wadi Rum were first ascended by Bedouins. While the steep walls can seem unclimbable, a combination of skilled route-finding, brave scrambling and perseverance lead them to the top of these natural fortresses long before the first westerners explored the region. Equipped with a decent topo, lots of water and the necessary



ON PATROL  
The steep, exposed slabs of Jebel Barrah.

emergency kit, we got a lift to the start point with Atayek’s brother. I asked him whether he has climbed the mountains himself: “Yes, many times as a young man. It’s very beautiful, but you need to be really careful. Very easy to lose the way!”

We soon realised the truth in his words. We ascended between massive boulders, up a steep valley canyon cut into the huge Jebel Rum massif.

The massif extends around 15km north to south while its east-west traverse is around 6km. Most people attempt it as a two-day adventure and camp at the top, but we planned to explore it in a single day. Small ledges wander the faces up and down. Choosing right lead us higher, but the choice was not always easy. It’s as though we were in a giant game of Snakes and Ladders, hoping



SHIPS OF THE DESERT  
Camels are today primarily for tourists only: the Bedouin prefer the convenience and speed of a 4WD.



to land in the right place where a weakness in the rock would allow progress. Quite regularly some boulder or steep face blocked the way, but with perseverance we snaked higher, all the while thankful for the overcast sky and slight breeze which made the temperatures bearable.

Our map proved really useful and after four hours we stood atop Jebel Rum, marked by a huge Jordanian flag painted on the rock. The panorama was breathtaking: the bare bones of the land jutting up through the sand to bake in the blazing sun. The otherworldly air has led to Wadi Rum being called the Valley of the Moon, though it has often been the setting for movies set on far more exotic places than the Moon.

In the distance we could pick out Rum village, separated from us by a sheer maze of ridges and valleys. Our fix point was the Great Siq, a giant ravine in the massif which we needed to rappel down into and follow as our exit route. Scrambling down steep slabs, the rough sandstone almost allowed for Spiderman-like friction as we descended to a small tree-covered spot that had almost certainly been used as a campsite by lost

souls before. Small cairns of stones helped show the way, but not always correctly.

Feeling close to home we started to get careless. “This is the way!” pointed Antoine. “You sure? I think it's here,” responded a doubting Esther. Erring between rock towers we suddenly stood at a big drop – the Great Siq. A single rope indicated that somebody had rappelled down here before. But it looked very flimsy and we all agreed that this path was our last resort. The search continued. Luckily we had followed the advice to start early and now we had the benefit of a few extra hours before night fell. Once dark there would be no easy exit from this maze.

The route we were descending was called Hammad's route, named after Mohammad Hammad. He found this route back in the 1960s, climbing up and down the steep canyon to the summit barefoot and without safety equipment. The crux is a 5.9 step that is best aided with a dead cyprus tree that he jammed into the crack, Bedouin-style. I was relieved that we had ropes to rappel down what he had climbed without any safety equipment.

“I think I found it” shouted Esther, pointing at some rock carvings. Whether these were ancient rock carvings or graffiti from more recent tourist visitors is hard to decipher. There was similar graffiti all over Wadi Rum, successive cultures having left footprints for more than 2,500 years. They were also excellent waypoints as I could firmly match them up with our map. We were back on track and after a few exposed boulders, were on our first rappel, right by Hammad's cyprus. Behind us we could hear distant voices – descending climbers, following our route. Rappelling into the shadowed hush of the Siq felt like descending into a cathedral. The water has carved very tall overhanging walls through the years and we were in awe of Mother Nature capacity to delight.

Soon we were back in Rum village, after nine hours of scrambling, crawling and way-finding, where we bumped into the three climbers that had descended behind us. They had completed an ascent of Pillar of Wisdom, an imposing 250m, stepped sandstone tower that is today one of the most famous climbing routes in the area. It was

NESTED DOMES  
Looking out over the sun-baked  
sand and crags of Wadi Rum.





**SCRAMBLED LINES**  
Finding the right route on Bedouin trails can be tricky.

only so-named in the 1980s, after Lawrence's book, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, which he had penned in the aftermath of World War I.

While most of the jebel summits were climbed by Bedouins long ago, no real climbing happened in Wadi Rum until the mid 1980s. Then, fascinated by the rock formations in the film *Lawrence of Arabia* which was filmed here, a group of British climbers received permission from the Jordanian government to explore in 1984.

When the group arrived, they were welcomed into Rum, then a small settlement of tents, by the local Sheik and invited to his desert camp.

They asked whether they could have some help finding some good climbs. The Sheikh agreed to the proposal, but as the Bedouin had climbed everything, he wanted to know why the British needed all that equipment when the mountains had been climbed with no aids!

The visitors quickly discovered that their hosts were excellent mountaineers. They lived and travelled with the Bedouin for several months, naming all the mountains, and climbing Jebel Rum by various Bedouin routes. The locals proved sly partners – they'd point out routes and let the Brits have a go – sometimes not explaining that the seemingly straightforward route might require a bivvy or two. Over time, more and more routes have been added, most of them now referenced in an excellent guidebook by Tony

Howard, a member of that pioneering expedition.

The pillar had turned into a true epic for the exhausted Scots, it seemed: "We started at three in the morning, the climbing was easy but coming down was the hard part, we got really lost!"

Having just completed a very long route ourselves, we passed on the pillar and instead aimed for The Beauty – an aptly named route on West Face of Jebel Um Ejil to the east of Rum. Again following exposed Bedouin trails into the narrow gorges, we found a magnificent 200m wall, with a fantastic crack up the first two pitches. Despite what at first can look to be horrendously soft and loose climbing routes, Wadi Rum surprises with some excellent climbing but certainly the quality of the rock does add a touch of 'spice' to the routes. The imposing crack was followed by some delicate and balanced face climbing and rounded off with a bold and scary off-width crack which was too wide for most of our gear. Antoine took the lead and pushed higher, moving elegantly despite the mishap with a stuck cam and soon we were standing on the final anchor and scrambling onwards to our second summit in Wadi Rum.

Climbing in the area follows the traditional climbing ethos, and even the use of chalk is sometimes frowned upon by locals. Famously, the team who first ascended Pillar of Wisdom used only three bolts. Recently some sports climbing routes have been bolted – most famously Jihad (also known as La Guerre Sainte), a wild multi-pitch route on the eastern side of Jebel Um Ishrin. This 400m desert beast was bolted by French climber Arnaud Petit and graded at 5.12c.

While Rum village can at times be dusty and noisy – busy with Land Rovers shuttling tourists back and forth, especially around sunset – the true desert feeling is never far away. Next morning Atayek drove us into the Barrah Canyon, flanked

on three sides by walls so steep that we could drive right up to the start of the climbing routes. The drivers on scenic tourist drives know this too and while we were preparing for our climb of Merlins Wand, a jeep roared up. It was a group of teenagers from Shenzhen who were visibly baffled that we were climbers from Hong Kong. After the inevitable selfies, we finally got into the vertical, though our moves were frequently commented on from below with screams of "You are crazy!"

Once the tourist jeeps departed, the solitude of the desert engulfed us. Back down on the valley floor, we watched the rock slide from orange to deepest red as the sun set. We collected some firewood and built a fire, laying out our sleeping bags for our own night under the stars, our arms aching from climbing. As I lay back I wondered when I had ever seen so many stars.

At such moments it was tempting to think little has changed since the times of T.E Lawrence. The Bedouin are a major reason for that. They retain their highly patriarchal society and still have ownership of much of the land, protecting it from over-ambitious luxury developments. It keeps alive the allure of the desert as a place of solitude and adventure.

After several days of tough climbing we were clearly tired, but we wanted one more route. The skyline above our campsite was marked by an irresistible steep pyramid – the north summit of Jebel Barrah. Here we made some daring exposed

scrambles to a field of large slabs just below the final summit. Again a weakness in the rock allowed a surprisingly straightforward way to the summit from where we could overlook much of Wadi Rum.

It was our last day and my gaze drifted out to the infinity of the horizon. Camels roamed in the

valley below but otherwise total silence enveloped the surreal landscape. In the heat of the midday sun, I understood why T.E. Lawrence described this place as, "Vast, echoing and God-like." A landscape, inherently hostile and alien but mesmerisingly beautiful. Like so many before us, the desert had caught us in its spell. **AA**

#### PRACTICALITIES

##### When to go

The spring and autumn months are best: summer is way too hot and winter nights can be very cold.

##### How to get there

Royal Jordanian have several flights a week from various major Asian cities to Amman, the capital. From there, it is a three-hour trip by taxi or bus on good highways to reach Rum village.

##### Where to stay

Rum still retains the character of a desert village. For no-frills accommodation, contact Atayek Al Zalabeh, [www.facebook.com/atayek.alzalabeh](http://www.facebook.com/atayek.alzalabeh), who has catered for

climbers for years. He can also arrange transfers to Barrah Canyon and nights in the desert. If you prefer, there are also luxury campsites set up to cater for tourists looking simply for a night under the desert stars.

##### Further info

Wadi Rum features mostly traditional protected climbing routes suited to climbers proficient in trad techniques – this is not a place to learn. Rappel anchors have been put in on the most popular routes but the sandstone can be deceptive so make sure you test those you use first.

There are now hundreds of routes ranging from little more than hikes to exposed scrambles and full-on climbs. These are best summarised in Tony Howard's book, *Treks and Climbs in Wadi Rum, Jordan*.

### Best of the best – five routes not to miss

- Wadi Rum Traverse – The west-east traverse of the Jebel Rum massif is a classic and a great introduction to Bedouin routes. A 60m rope is needed for rappels, but most sections are just scrambles in sometimes exposed territory. Start early, take enough water and marvel at the route-finding skill of the Bedouin.
- The Beauty (5.10a) – A marvel of a route and rightfully one of the most climbed in Wadi Rum. The seven pitches are very different in character with laybacks, stemming, technical

slabs, and a bold off-width crack on the last pitch. From the top, scramble for 20 minutes to reach the summit.

- Pillars of Wisdom (5.10b) – Named after T.E. Lawrence's famous book, this pillar towers prominently above Rum village. The difficulties are not extreme but the trick lies in climbers moving efficiently. Don't underestimate the descent – it requires good route-finding skills and it's not uncommon for parties to get lost.
- Merlin's Wand (5.10b) – A 45-minute drive

from Wadi Rum village is the Barrah Canyon where you'll find this marvel. It's a magic line – a continuously straight crack in excellent, strong rock. In 2017, French climber Arnaud Petit found another two pitches extending all the way up to the high plateau of Siq Barrah.

- La Guerre Saint (5.12b) – One of the few fully bolted routes in Wadi Rum, it is also one of its most difficult. For a long time this 12-pitch route on the East Face of Nassraniya North Tower was considered unclimbable.

