

## WADI RUM: A JORDAN JEWEL (2002)

Stretched out on a foam pad inside the family-size black goat-hair tent, I thought I was settled in for the night. The whisper of the night desert wind keeps me from sleeping. I lay in the dark reflecting on my journey from the modern world to an isolated desert camp in the heart of Jordan, and anticipating what is yet to come.

I am at Wadi Rum, one of three dry riverbeds that drip down from the central mountains of Jordan like braids. On my map the twenty-five mile-long, two mile-wide corridor looks similar to countless other wadis I've seen. What makes Rum so spectacular are hauntingly beautiful granite and sandstone mountains-as high as 2000 feet-that soar from the sand in endless strata of browns, reds, purples and pinks.

Yesterday eight American photographers, Salah Khleifat our westernized Bedouin guide, a driver, and I drove from Amman to Rum Village and the end of paved road, and maybe civilization. After lunch we climbed into open-backed land cruisers for an excursion of the wadi and its rock arches and bridges, and petroglyphs. The former reminds me of our Canyonlands: the latter, of doodles or graffiti carved into rocks by ancient bored teenagers.

The ghost of T.E. Lawrence lingers over this part of Jordan. Leaving Rum Village we passed a tourist phenomenon. Lawrence wrote *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. Salah said many tourists ask where the seven pillars are. Physically they don't exist. However, to satisfy tourists, Bedouins gave that name to some colonnades. I count five, but perhaps with great imagination there are seven pillars. Later Salah points out a springs bearing Lawrence's name, a place where he had camped, and an area where perhaps part of the movie was filmed.

We arrive at camp after dark. All is not primitive. I see two large tents. One for dining and relaxing, the other for sleeping. There is a generator powering lights over long wooden tables holding an abundance of food, bottled water, wine and beer, and in the large dining tent. There are two tented one-hole toilets and a wash stand complete with soap and water from a five-gallon jug. Dinner is lamb and vegetables cooked in a sandpit most of the afternoon.

Around the after-dinner campfire conversation drifts back to T.E Lawrence. Sahla said that his grandfather knew T.E. Lawrence, that Arabs do not consider T.E. Lawrence a great man, and that neither T.E. Lawrence nor the British were interested in helping the Arabs. This is not my childhood recollection of Lawrence of Arabia on the stallion and in white flowing garb. I find it interesting that Shala always uses initials when speaking of Lawrence. Perhaps it is his way of showing contempt. One by one we drift off to the sleeping tent with boys on one side of a cloth partition and girls on the other.

An hour before dawn I am roused awake for my appointment with a four-legged humped back creature. The chief driver assigns us to specific camels based in part on our leg

length, weight and horseback riding experience. My camel casts me a baleful eye knowing that I am no great shakes as a horseman. I climb aboard. The camel driver tugs on the frayed rope reins. The beast jerks upright, rear end first, then stiff-leggedly lumbers forward. "Put one leg over the camels neck." I am told. This is not like riding a horse. I soon discover that my camel has two speeds...stop and slow. I manage to more or less stay with the group.

We stop to photograph the sunrise over a series of sandstone ridges. There are no clouds and no decent images. Two of the land cruisers soon arrive with our picnic breakfast. We meander along, sometimes together, other times only within shouting distance. My driver disappears and I have sole responsibility for navigating the desert. But my camel goes as if he has done this often before. The sun gets higher and hotter. The desert becomes boring. Parts of my anatomy are sore no matter how I shift in the saddle. We periodically stop, dismount, photograph red sand dunes, camels and the drivers who magically appear, then remount and continue on.

At last, on the horizon, is Rum Village. But it's still almost an hour of camel riding away. When I blessedly dismount for the last time it's been six hours since breakfast. I weave slightly heading for shade and lunch. Two days on the desert and I feel like unwashed spinach.

Westerners can hardly be blamed for being concerned about safety when traveling in parts of the Arab world. Tourism is a major industry for Jordan. but the Middle East's bad reputation is keeping them away in droves. Our hosts were so happy to see us that they paid for wine or beer at lunch and dinner, something that I've never experienced before. We were in Jordan during the time Israeli troops surrounded Arafat's Ramallah compound and were destroying parts of Jenin. We never felt threatened although over 60% of the population is Palestinian. Only once did I encounter hostility. It was one individual in an Amman market who stood eyeball to eyeball with me after spitting on the ground and shouting "Down with Bush." I shrugged and said "Don't yell at me. I didn't vote for him!" and walked away with no further commotion.

Wadi Rum apparently enraptured T..E. Lawrence, at least for three years, and has caused more than one traveler to don a kaffiyeh and gaze defiantly into the middle distance. Not me. I love deserts but after a couple of days look forward to a hot shower, cold beer and a clean bed. I have no suppressed desire to become a Bedouin.