

THE SECRET TRAIL IN THE CITY OF PETRA, JORDAN

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BRET LOVE & MARY GABBETT

I CRIED TEARS OF JOY WHEN we visited Jordan's ancient City of Petra. I don't care how many times you've read about this "rose-red city half as old as time" (as poet John William Burgon once described it): NOTHING can prepare you for the intense emotion of seeing this immense archaeological wonder in person.

From the first moment I laid eyes on Al Khazneh (a.k.a. The Treasury)—stopping dead in my tracks to marvel at a tantalizing glimpse from between the sheer sandstone cliffs of the Siq—I was mesmerized by the majesty of this otherworldly desert dream. But that's not why I cried...

Petra is easily the #1 tourist attraction in Jordan, attracting around 600,000 visitors a year. So we got there just after sunrise in an attempt to beat the crowds.

We failed, miserably. By the time we got to the Treasury, hundreds of people were already milling about and posing for photos. I was strangely disappointed by this, but had heard tales of a secret hidden hiking trail—rarely taken by tourists—that led to stunning views from above the Treasury.

The incredulous look on the face of our guide, Ali Abudayah, when I told him we wanted to make the arduous trek (up more than 500 stairs, after walking 14 km the previous day and another 3 km+ to get to the Treasury) was absolutely priceless. "Are you sure?" he asked, clearly concerned. But if we were game, then so was he.

So we made our way down a street lined with facades (whose style was copied from the front of a Roman temple) carved into the richly colored rock while Ali told us more about Petra's history.

Established sometime around 300 BC as the capital city of the Nabataeans, Petra was the center of the region's caravan trade thanks to their ability to control the region's water supply via dams, cisterns and water conduits. With the wealth resulting from selling this water to travelers, they constructed elaborate monuments and tombs boasting a mixture of Greek and Egyptian influence.

After the Nabataeans were conquered by the Romans around 100 AD, Petra began to decline. Over centuries, countless treasures were stolen from the tombs and some structures collapsed due to flooding, erosion and weathering. Unknown in the Western world until it was introduced by Swiss explorer Johann Ludwig Burckhardt, the city of Petra became a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1985, and is now consistently ranked among the world's greatest wonders.

Today, Bedouins are the only ones allowed to live here, camping in caves all around Petra at night and hawking their various wares by day. They've been here for centuries, and the women of the region were famously enlisted by T.E. Lawrence (a.k.a. Lawrence of Arabia) during the Arab Revolt to help repel an attack on the city, ultimately devastating the Turkish/German forces.

Many tourists rent Bedouin pack mules to carry them through the vast city, but the donkeys couldn't go where the hidden trail would take us. The trail is unmarked and fairly rarely traveled, but its base is located directly across from the tombs (if you reach the amphitheater, you've gone too far). Look for a 6 x 6-foot, heart-shaped hole in the rocks,

then clamber up, through and over it to find your way.

There are incredible sights you'll see along the way that are not marked on any city of Petra maps we've found, such as the "Painted Room," which boasted some of the most colorful rock striations we've encountered. These koka (burial chambers carved into rock) were a common form of burial for wealthy people in ancient times, and line the hills all around Petra.

The hike provided an incredible vista of the Amphitheater, which was carved into the foot of the mountain called en-Nejr in order to give attendees the best possible view of the elaborate tombs surrounding it. Here, thousands of people would crowd in to watch poetry recitations and theatrical performances. It was impossible not to feel the energy of the past resonating throughout the hillside.

As we climbed higher, gradually working our way around the entire base of the mountain, we passed monument after monument that looked strikingly similar to the Treasury. The Urn, Silk, Corinthian and Palace tombs were all in varying states of ruin—the erosion of the centuries was much more evident here—but impressive nonetheless. We looked up to see a lone Berber man sitting atop his donkey on the summit as the sun crept higher and hotter into the sky, and finally reached the beginning of the staircase that would lead us to the top.

I'll spare you the gory details of our exertion, but you can do the math: Over 500 steep rock stairs, nearly 100-degree temperatures, after hiking 4 km that morning and 14 km the day before. We were exhausted, but the stunning scenery along the way (including this herd of goats resting in the shade of a sheer rock cliff several hundred feet above the valley floor)—and the reward we knew lie waiting for us at the summit—encouraged us to press on.

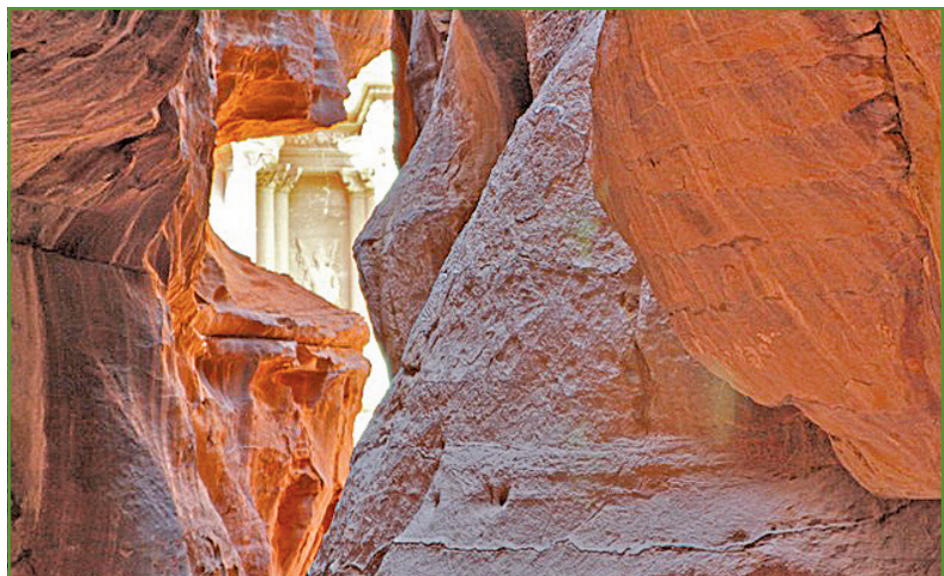
When we reached the top of the stairs, completely exhausted and somewhat dehydrated, even Ali did not seem quite sure of which way to go to see the Treasury. He admitted that, despite guiding hundreds of visitors to the city of Petra, he'd only climbed this route a few times. If people don't specifically ask to go there, guides as a rule do not offer.

As we worked our way around the summit, we saw only one other hardy hiker. What we did see was a donkey, a small Bedouin tent, and a handsome young man starting a fire to boil some delicious Berber tea. His name was Mahmoud, and he'd grown up within the walls of this ancient city, sleeping in the caves at night. His family led tourists up to the Monastery by donkey, but Mahmoud seemed content with his hospitality tent, catering to the rare adventurer who made their way to one of the most beautiful spots we've ever seen.

As I shrugged off the heavy backpack and settled into position at the edge of the cliff high above the Treasury, this is the awe-inspiring view that greeted my weary eyes.

As Mahmoud handed us steaming hot glasses of black tea with sage and Ali proposed a toast to our health, those eyes welled up with tears. I'd dreamed of this moment for over 20 years—ever since seeing Petra in Indiana Jones & the Last Crusade—and I was simply overwhelmed with the beauty of this ancient archaeological relic.

It wasn't so much the aesthetic appeal of



the monument that made me cry, but the significance of the moment. My wife and I have sacrificed so much in the pursuit of our crazy dream of traveling the world. We've invested so much of our time and energy into building our website (GreenGlobalTravel.com) to be something we could be truly proud of, and there are inevitable moments in the ongoing struggle when you start to wonder if it's all worth it.

In that moment, when our little website took us halfway across the world, to the heart of the Middle East, to a sight very, very few people ever get to see (whether because they do not know it exists or are unwilling to make the climb), it was more than worth it. It was a symbolic moment, reminding us that it truly does pay to work hard and dream big.

I've been to dozens of hookah bars and

restaurants over the years, and have never before had the urge to try it. But suddenly it felt like the thing to do. Mahmoud loaded his bowl with fragrant, fruity "Hubby Bubbly" and passed it over to me. Mary and I sat there on top of the world, drinking hot tea, smoking a hookah, savoring the peace and tranquility of knowing we were exactly where we were supposed to be.

This vida loca doesn't always offer moments of crystal-clear metaphysical clarity, but our arduous trek up a secret hidden trail in the ancient city of Petra gave us a rare gift: It not only rewarded us for our willingness to venture off the beaten path, both in Jordan and in life, but it confirmed that this insane path is precisely the one we are supposed to be on.

And that, dear readers, has made all the difference.