

blazing sandals

From Amman to Aqaba, TRACY YOUNG

discovers the chic of Araby

Remember the scene in *Lawrence of Arabia* when Peter O'Toole hitches up his djellaba, raises his fist, and shouts: "to Aqaba!"? Lawrence had a military objective; ours was a flush toilet.

A group of other journalists and I had been scouring the Wadi Rum, that glowering stretch of desert on the southern edge of Jordan where Lawrence holed up without concern for creature comforts during the Arab revolt of 1917, and where the equally obsessive David Lean had filmed the train wreck scene for the movie version in 1962. Fortunately for us, the road to Aqaba these days is a slick two-lane blacktop, heavily populated by diesel rigs bearing supplies overland to Iraq, so the trip, which must have wreaked havoc with Lawrence's kidneys, took a mere hour and a half, after which we gratefully crawled into the Holiday Inn and ate an enormous meal by the pool, competing with three generations of Oriental-faced cats who were anxious to make off with our kebabs.

When evening fell, as it does in the Middle East like a curtain of velvet, we hit the souk, where everything's

for sale—shoes, rice, dubbed cassettes of the local hit parade—and it all reeks of cardamom. Afterward, we wandered across the street into a park, which seemed to be populated solely by small groups of men huddled, smoking and whispering, in the dark. "Look," said my companion with a little trill of glee, "we've just stumbled upon the only gay bar in Jordan."

Jordan is a country on the move—the morning muezzin is drowned out by the sounds of a backhoe—but it's not yet *that* advanced; it's more like America in the Eisenhower years, which had very little interest in the wilder shores of love. What Jordan *is* interested in is tourism. "After all," remarked the minister of information with a shrug, "God didn't give us any oil."

What Jordan does have is (Continues, page 256)

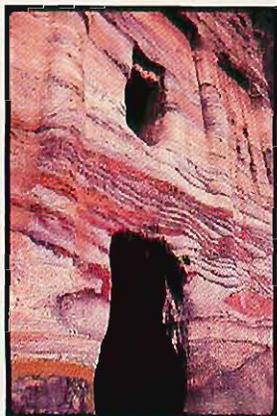


O'Toole as Lawrence, above; top, Jordan's ancient Petra

Travel

an image problem. Despite King Hussein's reputation as the only sane man in the Middle East, Jordan is a destination that raises eyebrows: an imagined land where women go veiled in public and terror lurks in every piece of carry-on luggage. Given this, the government has been promoting it as a peaceable kingdom where the strict commandments of the Koran and traditional family ties are as seductive as new roads and luxury hotels.

As it turned out, we were probably far safer in Amman than we would have been in many American cities, where rape and murder are quotidian attractions; and Royal Jordanian's security regulations are five steps ahead of the FAA's. Nonetheless, it was comforting to arrive, on the first leg of my journey, at Queen Alia International Airport and gaze upon a scene that looked uncannily familiar. The young women milling about the baggage claim weren't wearing veils. Most had on Guess? jeans in various



Petra's sandstone cliffs

stages of acid-washed disrepair; and I wager not one would have been caught dead in my sensible Alcott & Andrews skirt of Basic Bedouin Black. The only clue that we weren't, in fact, in Southern California was that we were surrounded by portraits of His Majesty, the King. One, an oil painting displayed where an airport clock should have been, prompted a jet-lagged member of our group to announce: "Local time, half-past Hussein." Like L.A., which someone once described as "six suburbs in search of a city," Amman, built on thirteen *je-bels*—or hills—is a hastily scribbled symphony of architectural dissonance, where low-rent concrete slabs in a neo-Mediterranean mode rub shoulder to knee with grandiose skyscrapers. And, like L.A., Amman has its fair share of types from central casting hanging out in the lobbies of its better hotels. Take Nick, a gone-to-seed version of everybody's all-American with that sly gregariousness that fairly screams CIA.

"Amman is a real fun town," he bellowed, brandishing a foot-long cigar. Then he tossed back his Scotch, cleared the beer cans off the seat of his muddy Toyota, and drove us at breakneck speed to hear a Lebanese pop star named Ragheb Alama, who sounded a bit like Roy Orbison, and to watch a belly dancer set seven million sequins in motion all at once. The belly dancer was from Michigan; she probably worked for The Company, too.

Amman may be just the place to let off steam when you've been working undercover, but our hosts had more than revelry on their minds, and the next day we were shepherded onto our bus and shuttled off to an Old Testament landscape of rough rolling hills dotted with dusty sheep and tiny goats and herds of matted camels. Like the Romans, the Byzantines, and the armies of Islam, we traveled the King's Highway, back and forth across the centuries—from the hot springs at Zerqa Ma'in, one of Herod's watering holes, to Mukawir, where John the Baptist lost his head—while distances were measured by how many times we heard both sides of an ancient Peter, Paul, and Mary tape.

The sun glared from high in a fierce blue sky. The air was so dry that dust congealed in our mouths. And for people whose

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religious training came second-hand from the movies, the cumulative effect of heat and all this history was to make us feel like dress extras in a De Mille epic. At the first opportunity, we broke down and bought red-checkered headgear from a stand by the side of the road. "We look like a busload of nuns in tablecloths," said one woman.

"Yeah," said another, "from The Order of Joe Allen's."

The jewel in Jordan's archaeological crown is Petra, an entire city carved by marauding Nabateans from the soaring sandstone cliffs, inaccessible except by a narrow cleft in the rock, the Siq. It was the kind of place Howard Hughes would have admired, but by the time we got there, we had inspected so many ruins—mosaics at Madaba, restorations of Jerash—that we had crossed, irrevocably, the line between awe and exhaustion.

Our savior, ironically, was our guide, who, as it turned out, was related

to the mayor of Petra. And when the mayor and some other local pols invited us to a cookout in the hills, we gratefully accepted, climbed back in the bus, and drove for an hour in the dark, serenaded by a man with a lute. Finally we pulled off the road, bumped over a ditch, and, on foot, scrambled up a field of boulders. At the top of a cliff by the mouth of a cave was a small ledge; off to one side men were grilling chickens by the light of the moon in a deep glowing pit. So we helped ourselves to beer from the cooler, passed the trays of grape leaves and taramasalata, and lay back on the blankets to look at the stars.

"This is fab," said my companion, waving a huge joint of meat. "Just like dinner at the Flintstones'."

In truth, it was the stuff of Romance. Or of nineteenth-century travel literature, with its tales of the *feranji*—European ladies seduced by Arab charm. And it was having a devastating effect

on the women in our group. One old bird, who'd become increasingly flirtatious on a double shot of Scotch, told the story of Isabel Burton, a fancy Englishwoman who ran off with a desert sheik. "Why would anyone want to do

**"She was a Victorian, you fool....
She went to Bedouin, so she
thought she had to marry him"**

that?" demanded an ardent feminist.

"She was a Victorian, you fool," her neighbor said. "She went to Bedouin, so she had to marry him."

Dinner was over. We gathered up our blankets and threw the bones in the fire. The moon had set behind the cliffs, and the campsite, when we turned back to look, had completely disappeared. It was as if it had never been there. Or had been there in a dream.

Given the state of our hormones and the fact that paranoia is as much a part of the writer's kit as sharp No. 2 pencils, it made sense that we would spend our last night in Jordan roaming the back streets of Aqaba, looking for sexual intrigue that didn't, in fact, exist. But even Lawrence of Arabia knew when to hang up his headdress, so we abandoned our search for adventure and went back to the Holiday Inn, where the headlining act that night was an all-girl group from Cracow named The Kiss. Wearing long swirling skirts in loud floral prints and gigantic flowers tucked behind their ears, they shook their maracas and belted out "Memories." It was clear from their game smiles that they didn't understand a word of what they sang.

The architects of the Jordanian tourist effort admit that their country is one people are more likely to visit in conjunction with another destination. Ours, like Lawrence's, was Cairo. And we were as misguided as he had been about the best way to get there.

When Lawrence set out to cross the Sinai on camel, his cohorts looked at him askance. One can only imagine what they would have thought of us as we made off for the ferry dock to board the *Farah I*. She was a seaworthy vessel, but hardly the Love Boat. Upstairs in the first-class lounge, a family of fourteen crowded around an oversized video screen watching Tom & Jerry car-

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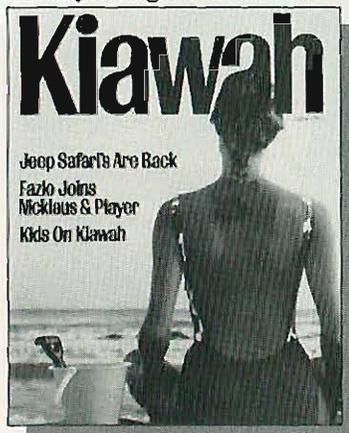
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toons. Lunch was a tepid hot dog, and there was no such thing as a deck chair. Undaunted, a couple of us lowered ourselves onto the bow of the ship, perched on a gigantic coil of rope, and gazed out to sea, watching as the water changed color from aquamarine, ultramarine, and lavender to the darker tones of very expensive ink.

In Nuweiba, the Egyptian port, it was 120°. When our guide finally pulled up, waving from a ramshackle van, we trudged past dozing camels and lit out for what "Gramps," as we dubbed him, promised was a wonderful new resort.

Roughly ten thousand square miles of limestone, sandstone, and granite, the Sinai, from our vantage point, looked like it was used for target practice with nuclear weapons. Inside the van, life wasn't much cheerier. There was no air-conditioning. On the other hand, if you opened your window you felt as if you were sitting under a hair dryer. The only recourse was to fall asleep, which our leader did, only to awake with a start when a fly flew into her gaping mouth. It was the first living thing we'd seen in hours.

The Dahab Tourist Village, as promised, had all the modern conveniences. Unfortunately, **The belly dancer was from Michigan; she probably worked for the CIA, too** none of them worked. The toilets backed up, keys broke off in the door locks, and the beach, where several hardy Brits were bivouacked, was covered with slick patches of oil. We considered slipping our driver a C-note and forging right through to Cairo, but no one could figure out how to itemize a bribe on her expense report.

It would be only fair at this point to ask why in God's name anyone would cross the Sinai. (To get to the other side?) Actually, down the coast, not far from our internment camp, is a little town called Sharm El Sheikh, where the skin diving is unsurpassed and a spanking-new Hilton hotel graces the seashore. And if you're the kind of person who went to the Harmonic Convergence, there's St. Catherine's monastery, founded by the Emperor Justinian and long a mecca for pilgrims: the supposed spot where Moses saw the burning bush. However, when we pulled in and hiked up the long drive to the monastery, it was closed. Several industrious Scandinavians who had spent the night on the mountaintop encouraged us to make our way to the top, but we were too dispirited to do anything more taxing than grouse. "Why don't they take the bloody burning bush," said my friend, "and pot it in the lobby of the Nile Hilton."

As John Gregory Dunne has written, travelers to Third World countries become obsessed with getting out. But there was no way we were going to spend another twelve hours on an unair-conditioned van with a jabbering fool. "Look," spoke up an assertive type, "just take us to the airport."

Finally Gramps agreed, but when we got there he swore there were no flights. "I don't care," said the delegate from the fashion magazine. "I'll buy a plane and petty-cash it."

An hour later, our flight was called and we climbed the gangway, leaving Gramps our box lunches. "So," said my seatmate, settling back with a sigh. "I guess I'm responsible for getting us out of here."

"How'd you manage that?" I asked.

"Remember that guard at the gate?" She grinned and unzipped the top of her jumpsuit. "I just showed him this."

It was our first glimpse of the pyramids. ▽