

ARABIAN TRAILS

Hans Rey and Dave Watson explore the Kingdom of Jordan



by Carmen and Hans Rey
photos by Dean "Blotto" Gray

When I received a phone call from the producer of the popular TV series, 'Ride Guide' asking me if I would like to go with them to Jordan in the Middle East, I was pretty excited. Jordan has been on my "Places to ride" list for a long time. Who wouldn't want the chance to explore this ancient land as a biking destination? Most people have seen pictures of the sandstone city of Petra, I wanted to do more than see images, I wanted to be there and be in them. With that in mind, I hesitated for, oh, about a second, before I of course, said yes.

My riding partner was legendary freerider and downhiller Dave Watson, best known for his infamous jump over the Tour de France in 2003, he has recently signed to ride for GT Bicycles . Cory Horton was our cameraman and Dean 'Blotto' Gray, our photographer. Blotto is known for shooting the best snowboarders in the world including Shaun White, he is also an in-house photographer for Burton. We hadn't worked together before, but as is the case with these trips, we got to know each other pretty quickly. We hit it off, working hard, but having plenty of laughs along the way and while having a pretty amazing trip.



Unlike my usual adventures where I always plan from A-Z and have some sort of a mission in mind, this time we were in the hands of the Jordanian Tourism board. They had put together an interesting itinerary which, once completed, gave us a good insight into the Jordanian culture, history, food, people and landscape.

Bicycles in general, are hardly used in Jordan; in fact, I didn't see one single bike on the roads or trails the whole time we were there. Why? Beats me, I have no idea! Mountain bikers do not exist and bike shops are as rare as surf shops in Nepal. The good news was, we didn't need a bike shop, as long as we had our own bikes.

But that was precisely our problem, my bikes didn't arrive, in the end, I had to wait for almost 3 days until they eventually turned up. Dave's bike was lacking a front wheel and Blotto, our photographer's bike was without pedals. We were in a bad and desperate situation. At one point I was actually considering flying to Italy to get my Euro bikes or alternatively looking for some bike shops in nearby Israel. But I did neither of these, as they say, "with every cloud comes a silver lining", we made the most of our waiting time and became real tourists. Exploring, the markets and feasting on delicious local foods, especially the Hummus and Falafel washed down with sugar cane juice, yum. Along the way, we even managed to find one of those elusive bike shops where we could buy Blotto some pretty funky plastic pedals.





Once my bikes arrived and I put them together, we were able to hit the road and head 30 miles north to the ancient Roman and biblical city of Jerash. For our Jordan adventure, Dave and I brought our GT Carbon Force 6 inch full suspension bikes. In addition, I also brought my trials bike just in case those cities of antiquity provided me with some tasty trials sections. Jerash, which originated way back in 1200BC, was amazing. I had never even heard of this city before. They say it is second only to Pompeii for its size and intact condition, although unlike Pompeii, Jerash was never wiped out by a volcano. The site is huge and believe it or not, we were allowed to ride our bikes on the ancient Roman cobblestone roads. Off we went exploring under Hadrian's Arch, the Theatre, Hippodrome, Oval Plaza, Temples and Nymphaeum. The crazy thing is this old city is built right next to the modern town and the contrast is stark.



Our next stop was the Dead Sea, 400 meter/ 1200ft. below sea level and the lowest point on earth on land. The air temperature was extremely hot - about 45C or 115F. We were grateful for the chance to float in the intensely salty water, which was refreshing, but it was also trippy. The salt content is so concentrated that it has 10 times more salt than regular ocean water, hence the fact that one cannot drown. No matter what you do, you still float on top. The high salt content also means that nothing lives in the Dead Sea - no fish, algae, or even bacteria. It is an experience I recommend, minus the saltwater in your eyes. Man, that stings!



The next day, 30 minutes south, we rode up the Rift Valley towards Wadi Mujib canyon, and the Mujib River Arnon, which flows directly into the Dead Sea. This is an oasis in the dry, hot desert. The riding was taxing, the ground was soft, a lot like the dry hills in Utah, but we had a great view of the Dead Sea and after a bit of an uphill we were rewarded with a nice downhill. Once we arrived at the gorge, it was time to leave the bikes behind and proceed on foot. At a 328', 100m high and 32', 10m wide, the canyon was pretty spectacular; the 2 mile hike gave us the chance to cool down as we splashed our way through the water. Once we reached our halfway point, we came to a waterfall; our guide had a treat lined up for us. We got to rappel down the 150' rock face to the bottom; that was a lot of fun, definitely not something I get to do everyday.

Our next stop was a visit to The Zikra Initiative. This is a charity which is a Voluntourism program and was set up to allow people to experience a little and learn something from the everyday skills of the Bedouin people. In exchange for a little bike riding lesson, a mini trials show and letting the kids rip on my GT, we got to learn a thing or two from the locals, for example, how to make a banana leaf basket, how to make flatbread and even how to paint a henna tattoo.

The evening was drawing in; it was time to head for our next destination, The Dana Biosphere Reserve, an area of 308 sq km of valleys and mountains. We cycled up the rocky trails to the once forgotten Dana Village area. Dana Village, which resembles ghost town in many ways, overlooks the scenic Wadi Dana and has witnessed human settlement since about 4000 BC. Evidence unveiled by archaeological exploration shows that Paleolithic, Egyptian, Nabataean and Roman civilizations were drawn to the area by the fertility of the soil, the water springs and the strategic location. For us, the main attraction was the 14km downhill that awaited us after a welcome night's sleep in typical backpackers accommodation. The following morning we were able to explore the deserted paths, fruit orchards and trails in and around the village, we even had the benefit of a nice cool breeze, which was relief in the heat of another day in the desert.



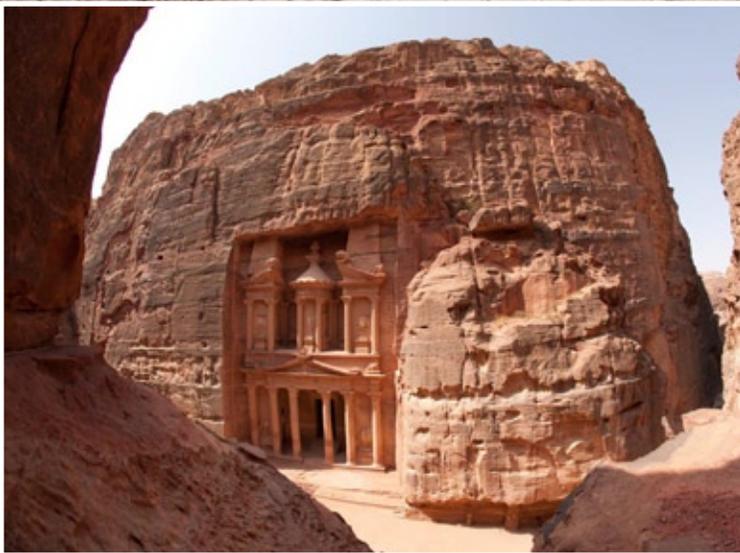
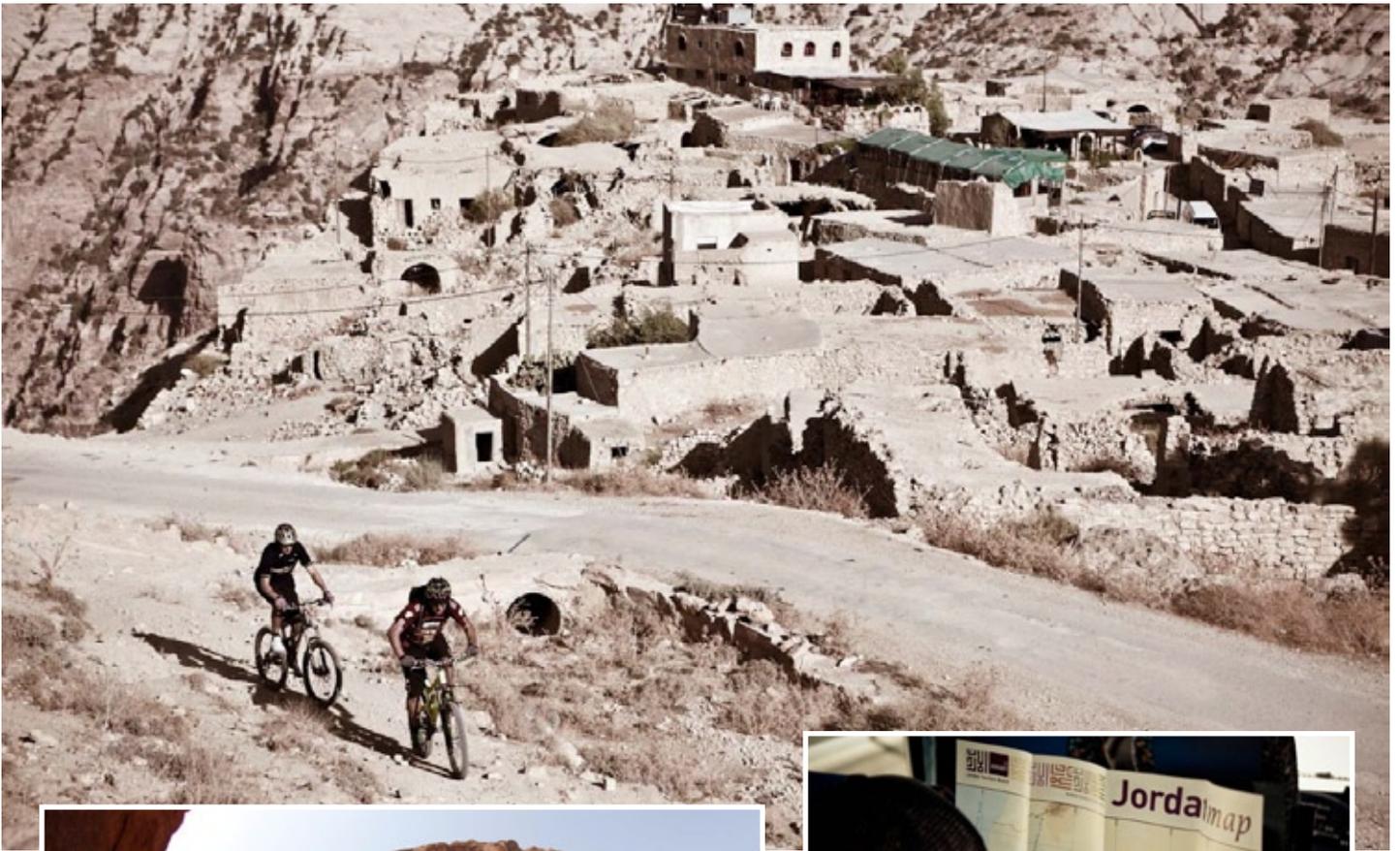
Next we worked our way to one of the most incredible and famous sites in the world, the ancient and until 1812, forgotten city of Petra. Through a narrow gorge in the desert, an old trail leads to countless buildings and temples chiseled into the rock-face of the narrow sandstone canyons. Today the old Nabataean capital that was located on a popular caravan route, is a UNESCO World Heritage site and famous tourist destination, the Indiana Jones movie also brought this rose colored stone city whose name literally means “Rock” to the attention of a whole new audience. There are many stone building and trails that wind through a labyrinth of canyons and strange but beautiful rock formations. If only those walls could talk and tell us their stories from the past...

I have visited some pretty amazing places in my life, but I have to say that Petra was a highlight. It is right up there as one of the most spectacular sites I have ever seen and it fascinates me with all of it's unanswered questions, I always like a good mystery.



Following in the footsteps of T.E Lawrence we headed to the desert known as Wadi Rum. Lawrence also known as Lawrence of Arabia thanks to the David Lean film, based his Arab revolt in the Wadi Rum some 60km east of Aqaba. It was time for us to spend the night in a Bedouin camp, but first, time for dinner, always a highlight in any day, We had a delicious meal made by the locals, its called 'Zaarp' and the meat is literally cooked underground. It was a feast. The night sky was full of another kind of beauty, I made my bed under the Arabian Milky Way. No light pollution, apart from a few candles, absolute darkness. The blanket of stars seemed descend all the way to the earth, giving the impression that I could reach out my hand and touch them.





The next day our mission was to explore the Wadi Rum for some trails we could use for biking, but it had a rather disappointing conclusion. As awesomely beautiful as the rock formations, mountains and rock bridges were, they offered little biking opportunities, especially since they were surrounded by soft sand and even the jeep friendly roads were not what we were looking for. I did find some spectacular and very exposed rock bridges. At first one particular rock bridge looked to be un-rideable, but on closer inspection I found my line. I just couldn't resist riding it - that was definitely a trials challenge and it got my heart rate pumping. The locals assured us that there were more rideable trails, but time was running out and we had more exploring to do.

Located only miles from the Israel, Egypt or Saudi Arabian boarder, the Red Sea town of Aqaba is Jordan's only seaport. Once under Ottoman/Turkish rule but then liberated by Lawrence and Prince Faisal in 1917, it is now a thriving port and popular tourist destination for those that want to scuba dive and explore the Red Sea. For us, after several days in the extreme heat and dust, the 5 star hotels organized by the Jordanian Tourism board were a very welcome treat, such an oasis after the furnace of the desert. Not something I am used to on my trips, but hey, I could get used to it.

We finished our whirlwind tour in Amman, the capital of Jordan. There is potential for some great mountain biking, at this stage, though, it would be best for people who want to ride there to find a tour operator or guide that knows the trails and best riding spots. There are plenty of highlights and a beautiful culture to experience. Keep your eyes open for our TV production - its scheduled to air in over 60 countries. Ride on.

- Hans Rey









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