

Jordan is spectacular, safe and friendly – so where are the tourists?

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You are safe and sound here," the gift shop owner said, as he handed over some change. At breakfast, the waiter had been similarly reassuring. "I always tell my guests they are in a very safe place. There might be issues around the corner," he said, pouring out tea. "But here you are perfectly safe."

After a while these repeated soothing asides became rather disconcerting. I hadn't expected to find Jordan anything other than peaceful, but since the bottom has fallen out of the tourism industry because of the conflict in neighbouring Syria, most people you meet have an urge to emphasise how risk-free a trip here is.

It's easy to see why. Thanks to the widespread sense of unease about travelling to the region, Jordan, as well as being safe, is now extremely empty. Some of the country's most extraordinary sites are virtually deserted; tourism has fallen 66% since 2011. As a tourist, you can't help feeling worried for the people who work in the travel industry (which has historically contributed about 20% of GDP), but at the same time there is an uneasy pleasure in visiting places like Petra, one of the new seven wonders of the world, in near silence.

Nothing had prepared me for how spectacular Jordan is, and perhaps part of the intense experience of visiting now is tied up with the unusually solitary feeling you have as you walk through its ancient sites.

After a late-night arrival in Amman with Rose, my 12-year-old daughter, we set off early and drove through desert to Petra, arriving late morning. When tourism here was at its peak, there were as many as 3,000 visitors every day. On the day we visited in late October, only 300 people went through the gates. This meant that walking in the Siq, the natural gorge that leads through red sandstone rocks to the vast classical Treasury building, carved into the rockface in the first century BC, felt very peaceful. There were no crowds with selfie-sticks, no umbrella-waving tour guides. It was the most unfrazzling experience, which allowed us to look at the scenery and see it as it has been for centuries. Conservationists' concerns, referred to in my now out-of-date Lonely Planet Guide, about mass tourism in Petra – the pernicious effects of humidity and the damage wrought by thousands of feet trampling up the steps cut in to the rock – are no longer so acute.



The Siq that leads to Petra, Jordan.

Photograph: Emad Aljumah/Getty Images

We had only one day in Petra, but there was so much we wanted to see that we walked 12 miles, racing around in the heat to pack everything in, overwhelmed and stupefied by the quantity of beautiful tombs and facades. Guidebook photographs do no justice at all to the splendour of the site, the monumental architectural talent of the Nabateans (the nomadic people who built Petra) and the mesmerising way sunlight changes the colour of the rock as the day progresses, from orange to pink and, with dusk, to shadowy grey. This vast settlement is truly extraordinary. The canyon alone and the sudden, amazing reveal of the Treasury is enough in itself to justify a visit, but this is only the beginning.

We hurriedly climbed 700 steps up to the Monastery, a temple or tomb carved into the mountain summit, drinking hot, sugary mint tea at the top in a cafe offering a view over the whole site. The cafe owner appeared bemused by the reluctance of tourists to come. "It's safe here; we have no Isis. But people have stopped coming," he told us.

The Foreign Office travel advice notes that there is "a high threat from terrorism" in Jordan – but it makes the same warning about Egypt, and also Germany and France.

Petra's High Place of Sacrifice.

Photograph: Paul Harris/Getty Images/AWL Images RM

Jordan's defensiveness has built up over the past 15 years, as its location, sandwiched between Syria, Iraq, Palestine, Israel and Egypt, has conspired to discourage visitors. First there was the Intifada of 2000, then 9/11, then the war in Iraq. Then, just as things were beginning to pick up, in 2008 there was the global recession and, later, the violent aftermath of the Arab Spring, culminating in the ongoing carnage in Syria. The key thing to remember is that the Foreign Office website does not advise against travel to anywhere except a two-mile strip along the Syrian border (which is far from tourist sites); it also notes that 60,820 British nationals visited Jordan in 2015 and that most visits are trouble-free. We had lunch

at a restaurant under a canopy of trees at the centre of the site. Towards the end of the day, we walked around the back of the site, up another 670 steps, past tombs and Bedouin houses, to the High Place of Sacrifice – the exposed mountain plateau where the Nabateans performed religious rituals. A long twisting trail leads to the summit. We arrived at sunset having passed only four other tourists on the way up.



The cafe near the top was closed – last year's price list faded and flapping in the breeze and only a goat inside. Dotted everywhere were groups of camels sitting on the ground, their legs tucked beneath them, with no customers. There was some bitterness at the fickle nature of the global tourist market. "A bomb goes off in Turkey and people think 'We shouldn't visit Jordan,'" a jewellery seller said. A man selling bottles of sand with camel shapes formed from different coloured layers said this was the worst year since 2002, mournfully displaying the blown sand vases that are no longer selling. His friend's hotel had just closed and his business was very slow.

We walked back down at dusk, hurrying to make sure we were on flat ground before the light disappeared completely. There was no one else in the courtyard in front of the Treasury, and we walked silently up the Siq in the half light, watching the shadows creep up the rock, until it was totally dark. We heard the sound of donkeys being led back to their stables, but barely saw them in the darkness. As we reached the end of the gorge, we saw the beginnings of preparations for Petra by Night, with candles being lit so tourists can walk along in the late evening.



Bottles filled with sand forming camel shapes. Photograph: Alamy

We stayed at the lovely Petra Palace (doubles/twins from £57 B&B) in Wadi Musa, just a few hundred metres from the entrance to the site, and ate in a cafe a few doors down, enjoying small plates of hummus, *kibbeh* (fried lamb meatballs), *baba ganoush* (chargrilled eggplants), tabouleh and stuffed vine leaves.

On our second day we drove for two hours down to Wadi Rum, the spectacular desert that T E Lawrence described as "vast, echoing and godlike", with its rocks like melted wax emerging on the skyline, their colours shifting in the light and alien shapes forming from the cavities. We hired a guide, Abdullah, who drove us to sand dunes where we could climb the rocks

for amazing views and later we set up camp at the foot of a sandstone cliff. Abdullah made a fire and cooked meat-and-vegetable stew and potatoes, which we ate by torchlight, and then rolled out carpets on the sand so we could bed down in sleeping bags in the open. We woke up before dawn to watch the sun rise over the rocks, and walked up one of the cliffs before a breakfast of sesame paste halva and tea.



Jerash. Photograph: Alamy

Later in the week we travelled to the Dead Sea for a night, where there were just a handful of people floating in the salty water when we arrived at dusk, and then 30 miles north of Amman to see Jerash, a huge Graeco-Roman settlement, with theatres, colonnades, a hippodrome, triumphal arches, squares and mosaics depicting scenes of daily life – all well-preserved after an earthquake in 749 buried the ruins in sand for centuries. It felt such a privilege to see this remarkable

place so empty – so unlike the jostling experience of walking through the Forum in Rome. In a time when Peru has set a limit on the number of people walking the Inca Trail, and residents in Venice are protesting against tourist numbers, visiting Jordan feels like being transported back to another era, before charter flights and package holidays. When we arrived at 9.30am, there was one tour bus in the car park. It got busier towards lunchtime, but most of the time we were alone among the amphitheatres and plazas. We drank cardamom coffee in the Temple of Artemis, watching lizards dart out from between the Corinthian columns, while a stray kitten tried to climb into my handbag. Jordan clearly needs tourists to return. The big chain hotels are managing to weather the storm by shifting marketing to locals, but the smaller business are suffering. "Before 2011, 70% of our business came from Russia, Scandinavia, Germany and the UK. Now that has shifted to 70% of our business coming from Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine and expat Iraqis," the manager of Dead Sea Kempinski told me. "The bigger hotels can shift to weddings and the local market, but those who are most affected are the people selling trinkets."

The Jordanian Tourism Board is fighting back in imaginative ways. It recently brought a group of film producers and directors over from Los Angeles to show them the country's superb film locations. It has encouraged Instagram stars to come and post picturesque scenes from the desert. They like to remind visitors of the number of films made in Jordan, from Lawrence of Arabia to *Theeb*, which won the Bafta for best foreign film last year, to *The Martian* and *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*. The board is optimistic for 2017; UK visitors are already up 6% this year and the Russian market is up 1,200%.

Jordan is home to 635,000 refugees from Syria, 80,000 of them in the Zaatari refugee camp in the north of the country, and the World Bank has estimated that about a third of the country's nine million population is made up of refugees – Palestinians and Iraqis as well as Syrians.

The country's attitude towards the crisis is in marked contrast to that of some other nations. "We welcome refugees: they are our relatives," said our guide in Jerash, Talal Omar. "We have a long history together and we speak the same language. You having a good holiday in Jordan is helping Jordan tackle that issue. The money that tourists bring in to our country helps pay the overheads we have from the refugees."

I'm not sure that going on holiday in Jordan can be presented as directly aiding the refugee crisis, but certainly the reverse is true – that the absence of tourism is hugely problematic for the country.