

# Discovering Jordan

## The History of Adventure Tourism in Jordan

Tony Howard

It all started a long time ago at Christmas 1983. After fortuitously watching David Lean's epic film 'Lawrence of Arabia' I wrote to any address I could find in Jordan including the Royal Palace and the Tourism Ministry to see if I could get permission to climb in Wadi Rum. After months of unheeded correspondence I eventually obtained permission from the Tourism Ministry to explore the climbing potential.

Rum was then almost unknown to the outside world, and seemingly not at all to climbers (hadn't they seen the film?), although later research revealed that thirty years after Lawrence, three members of a British Mission to Saudi Arabia travelling with the protection of Glubb Pasha had passed through the valley. Inspired by the mountains they set off to make an ascent of Jebel Rum from the vicinity of Ain Shelaali. One of the trio, St John Armitage, stopped before the summit. According to St John, the other two, Major Henry Coombe-Tenant and a Lance Corporal with the marvellous nickname of 'Havabash' Butler made it to the top. If true, it was a remarkable effort and the first non-Bedouin ascent of any of Rum's mountains. A couple of years later a British Survey team arrived, a few of whom made it to the top guided by Sheikh Hamdan Amad, a Zalabieh Bedouin from Wadi Rum. Despite these intrusions, when another British party arrived in 1952, the Zalabieh were still the only ones with an intimate knowledge of their mountains.

This group included Tom Longstaff, then seventy-seven, but one of the greatest of the early Himalayan explorers. With him were his wife, Charmian, his daughter Sylvia and her husband John, who was in Glubb's Arab Legion. The previous year, Sylvia and John had been half way up Jebel Rum, hunting ibex with a young Bedouin. John said "It had been hair raising ... poised between heaven and hell ... never again would he set foot upon those ghastly cliffs". Consequently, when Sylvia and Charmian decided to try again, they took Sheikh Hamdan as their guide. Like the earlier Thamudic hunters, he chose to climb via the west face, by the route up which he had taken the survey team, most of whom had turned back. The route ascended a huge rift which we later named The Great Siq, having discovered it completely splits the mountain. John went off hunting ibex on another mountain with Sheikh Atieq, the man who was to welcome us to Wadi Rum thirty-two years later.

Climbing the canyon's southern wall, Sheikh Hamdan's party reached a series of ledges, separated by difficult steps, then a steep chimney with a crevasse directly beneath and a two hundred metre drop to one side. Finally, they reached the domes of the high plateau, through the maze of which Sheikh Hamdan led them to the summit. "Hamdan climbed with bare feet as surely as a mountain goat", Charmian Longstaff wrote in the Ladies' Alpine Journal. He was equally impressed by his two companions, "You English women", he said, "are as strong as men". They were certainly competent, as they climbed the canyon in two hours, taking "another hour up and down the complication of white domes to reach the summit"; a good time that is still rarely bettered.

It seemed these three ascents of Jebel Rum were the only on-Bedouin ascents of any of Rum's mountains until we arrived. Sheikh Hamdan was then an old man, but one of his sons, Hammad Hamdan, who had been a paratrooper in the Jordanian army was still occasionally employed by them as a guide and became one of our closest friends and mentors. The young man that had been hunting with the Longstaffs was now Sheikh Atieq, father of five sons. These were the people who welcomed us to Rum.

Its magnificent sandstone mountains are concealed in the desert near Aqaba and it was there that much of the Lawrence film's action had taken place re-enacting the Arab Revolt against the Turks with which Lawrence was involved. He famously described Rum as "vast, echoing and Godlike". He wasn't wrong. On our arrival there in September 1984, Al Baker, Mick Shaw, Di Taylor and I discovered a rock climbing bonanza now described as "amongst the world's best desert climbing areas" with its Bedouin hunting routes reputedly being "amongst the world's best mountain adventures". The Zalabieh Bedouin tribe of Rum immediately understood the value of our explorations. Sheikh Atieq gave us his approval and his sons and others including Hammad Hamdan and Mohammad Musa shared their knowledge of the mountains and their hunting routes, welcoming us to their desert camps and becoming lifetime friends.

That autumn we made the first non-Bedouin ascents of some of their magnificent climbs. These complex routes created whilst hunting ibex can be two or three miles long and most involve moves up to English grade 4, though many are harder and all are complex, demanding good route finding as well as ability. Knowledge of their location has been passed down father to son through the generations, and the Bedouin climb them up and down without ropes and often alone. Having pointed out the starts they left us with the challenge of finding our way up them - always fascinating and never easy! They also helped us to name all the mountains and showed us the previously unknown spectacular Burdah Rock Bridge 200 metres above the desert. Additionally we did some new climbs of our own - how could we resist - including one to the previously unclimbed summit of Jebel Kharazeh. Rum's climbing potential seemed limitless - we knew we would be coming back.

In fact we have been annually ever since. The following year we invited a friend of ours, Wilf Colonna, a French guide who Mick and I had met when climbing in Morocco's Taghi Canyon, to continue work with us on a climbing guidebook to Rum. The five of us also explored further afield, discovering a nice if easy trek down an impressive valley from the ancient and then almost abandoned cliff top village of Dana to the depths of Wadi Araba in Jordan's Rift Valley. We returned via what we called 'Petra's Secret Canyon', another nice discovery through which we emerged into Petra to the surprise of the local Bdul Bedouin. On our continuing annual and sometimes bi-annual Rum trips, Di and I always found time to explore a little further. Jordan's 'Grand Canyon', the Mujib Gorge was next as it had grabbed our attention when crossing its headwaters on the ancient road of The King's Highway. It was a committing adventure as everyone we asked said it was impossible and anyway they said there was no way out as the Dead Sea road had only just been started so it would be a long and difficult trek out.

Irresistibly intrigued we started late one afternoon, reaching the Dead Sea two days later where road builders and the Jordanian army didn't believe our story and thought we had entered illegally from Israel. Eventually, a phone call by the army to the Tourism Director saved the day. Other trips followed, initially in the south, Di and I finding some splendid trekking country in the wild and lonely mountains south of Petra, "where only Allah and the Bedouin live", as a Bedouin who invited us to his camp told us. Then we decided to have a look up north to see if we could make a trek connecting the antiquity sites of the hilltop Islamic castle of Ajloun with Greco-Roman Pella down in the Jordan Valley. To our surprise we found a wonderful two day walk through forested dales and amongst flower filled fields. We also discovered unclimbed cliffs of immaculate limestone and heard stories of caves as well as experiencing the wonderful hospitality of the local villagers. It seemed Jordan's adventure tourism potential was endless.

By the mid 1990s after regular annual visits to explore further in Jordan and with the second edition of our Rum Climbs guide finished as well as a small guide to Walks and Scrambles in Wadi Rum, Di were already

gathering information for a guidebook to treks, climbs and canyons in Jordan. Unfortunately Nasri Atalla, the Director at the Tourism Ministry who had always supported us unquestioningly had retired. No one else was interested and we needed assistance if we were to cover the whole country efficiently so with help from a Jordanian friend we contacted Queen Noor. She already had a Foundation to aid the economy of Jordan's rural communities so realised immediately the potential benefits that trekkers could bring to villages. She provided us with a car and driver who met us early each day to take us to the start of each proposed trek, and picked us up as arranged at the end. As always, like all Jordanians at that time he initially couldn't understand what we were doing, saying, "Why walk, I can drive you there?". Other than shepherds, no one walked anywhere. but he soon became enthusiastic and was totally reliable.

With a letter of introduction from Queen Noor we also got permission to explore Petra enabling us to find numerous new trails and ways in at a time when the famous canyon of The Siq, that unique entrance to the old city, was reputed to be the only way in. Amongst these new routes we were particularly pleased by the discovery of an ancient Nabataean way from the canyon of Little Petra directly to the mountain top 'Monastery'. I say 'discovery', though it was of course well known to the local Bedouin. It's now known as 'Petra's Back Door' and the once narrow ledge that the route followed has been widened and a retaining wall added, making it extremely popular but sadly removing it's 2000 year old Nabataean ambience.

When our Jordan guidebook was published in 1999, it listed well over a hundred treks. It had become obvious to us that many of them could be linked to form a continuous trail of, we guessed, around 350 miles. We would have gone back to Queen Noor to see if she would continue her sponsorship but sadly her husband King Hussein had just died and she was no longer in a position to help. Her successor, Queen Rania, wife of King Abdullah, was understandably too busy with her own new projects. So our plans were stalled but fortuitously we then met Mark Khano at the World Travel Show in London. He and a friend of his, Marwan Tarazi, had just completed a new ten day trail in Palestine for the millennium, in the hypothetical footsteps of Mary and Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem. He already knew about us as he had our Wadi Rum guide, and asked us to write a guidebook to their Nativity Trail on behalf of the Palestinian Authority which we gladly did.

Discussing Jordan with him we realised he was also one of the very few people who had trekked there in recent years. He understood the potential of our Jordan Trail project immediately and was keen to help but it wasn't until a few years later that he was able to spend time with us in Jordan. In the meanwhile Di and I continued to beaver away opening more trails. With a Bedouin friend from Rum we checked out a route from Aqaba through Rum and across the desert to link with our Petra treks. We also extended our Dana trek north for a day and prospected a potential trail from Greco-Roman Um Qais close to the Syrian border to link with our route from Ajloun to Pella. The missing links were getting fewer though some had now been explored by an Israeli, Itai Haviv, for his guidebook to Trekking and Canyoning in the Jordanian Dead Sea Rift published in 2000 though strangely we never met him.

With Mark's arrival in Jordan we really began to fill the gaps and explore the various options for making a country length trail a reality. Having a four wheel drive to roam the country was hugely valuable as maps are extremely difficult to get and ours from the late 1960s which Queen Noor had got for us were now massively out of date due to Jordan's rapid urban growth and increasing road network. We were soon to discover the value of Google Earth! We were also lucky to be requested by the rural community of Al Ayoun in north Jordan to create more trails in their area. Daniel Adamson from the Abraham Path Initiative had recently done a village to village trail for them and they were keen to take the idea further. It's a beautiful area and, as

in Rum, we hit the jackpot. Sometimes accompanied by local residents Eisa Dweekat and Mahmoud Hawawreh who were keen to discover the walks in their area we not only found numerous excellent one day treks but some good cliffs and even caves. Enough for a guidebook to the area. When linked, three of the routes also provided a great alternative to our original Ajloun to Pella trek. The Trail was coming together, but slowly, slowly.

Around this time, numerous young Jordanians (everyone is young when you are in your seventies!) were also getting out on the hills having been inspired by our guidebooks, or so they said. Hakim Tamimi who was soon to form an adventure company called Tropical Deserts later becoming a member of the Jordan Tourism Board, told us, "It was your guidebooks that gave us the love of our country". Rakan Meyer had already started Terhaal and was also trekking and canyoning. They too were opening new routes and Hakim and his friend Murad Arslan, a trekking guide, were soon adding to the Jordan Trail. The idea was catching on. Mark too formed his own company, Experience Jordan, and together with Mark and two other friends, Amjad Shahrour and Osama Cori we followed a mix of our old treks and Hakim's from the north to near the Dead Sea. We then had some amazing days first on an almost lost Roman road which we had found details of in Amman's Archaeology Museum then, with a local Bedouin, Abu Saif, we linked some superb Bedouin trails across the three great canyons of Zerqa Main, Hidan and Mujib.

Rejoining Hakim's route we then followed his footsteps to the mighty Crusader castle of Kerak before continuing south, once again in new terrain past the ancient village of Ainun then, to our surprise, we found a perfect way across the thousand metre deep Hasa Gorge. Beyond, we passed through the ancient but recently renovated village of Ma'tan where we picked up our trail to Dana and improved on it. The rest of the way was now known and included the already popular five day Dana to Petra trek along old Bedouin trails originally found by Jordanian guide Yaman Safadi and now classed by Geographical magazine as "in the world's top ten treks". Then on to Rum with Mahmoud Bdul, a Bedouin guide from Petra, who showed us a fascinating route through the desert mountains of Masuda exiting up the magnificent canyon of Wadi Aheimar. After four attempts, we also improved on the existing trail from Rum to Aqaba, finding an enjoyable route over granite mountains to the Red Sea. Job done!

In spring 2016 the Jordan Trail Association was formed headed by Muna Haddad and Bashir Daoud, and the trail received the approval of the Tourism Ministry, now headed by Her Excellency Lina Annab, herself a keen trekker and supporter of adventure activities. This enabled USAID to provide funding for waymarking what had become the trail's four hundred miles (640 kilometres), finding home stays along the route, training local guides and providing a website and promotional literature. In spring 2017 the trail was officially opened in Um Qais prior to the Inaugural Through Walk to which we were invited and what a uniquely happy trek it was. The following year, in 2018, The Jordan Trail Association, now with a new President, Dr Ramzi Tabbalat, a keen trekker and conservationist with worldwide experience, was honoured by His Majesty King Abdullah for its contribution to tourism development and putting Jordan on the global tourism map as well as providing jobs and improving income for communities along the trail. The Trail also won the Peace Through Cultural Diversity Award in 2018 and was chosen by National Geographic to be amongst the best 21 tourist destinations in the world for the year 2018.

Watching 'Lawrence of Arabia' back in 1983 had consequently kept Di and me busy with exploration for thirty four years during which time we made some lifelong friends and had many unforgettable experiences. The Telegraph listed Wadi Rum as fourth in the top fifty adventure destinations. Our discovery of the climbing and trekking in Rum and trekking in Jordan culminating in The Jordan Trail far exceeded our wildest

expectations. Those together with the superb canyoning, the snorkeling and diving in the Red Sea and even some caving, not to mention the famous hospitality make Jordan a unique adventure travel destination - I wholeheartedly recommend it.

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### **Tony Howard & Di Taylor**

Tony began climbing in 1953 and made the first ascent of Europe's tallest, steepest north face, Norway's Troll Wall in 1965 with an English team simultaneous to an ascent of a parallel route by a Norwegian team. That same year he qualified as a British Mountaineering Council guide and became a joint-founder of Troll (a UK leading climbing equipment manufacturer). In the late 1970s he designed the Troll Mark 5 climber's sit harness which became the template for almost every subsequent climbing harness design. He is now husband of and partner with Di Taylor in n.o.m.a.d.s. (New Opportunities for Mountaineering, Adventure & Desert Sports) an adventure travel development consultancy giving them the opportunity to explore new mountain areas. They climb and trek worldwide, and have written or contributed to guides to UK, Norway, Oman, Palestine and Jordan where they discovered the climbing and trekking in Wadi Rum and initiated the development of adventure tourism including the highly acclaimed Jordan Trail which is listed by National Geographic among its top 21 destinations to visit.

### **Guidebooks to Jordan**

*Treks and Climbs in Wadi Rum*. Cicerone Press

*Walks and Scrambles in Wadi Rum*, Al Kutba Guides

*Jordan, Walks, Treks, Caves, Climbs & Canyons*. Cicerone Press

*Walks, Treks, Climbs & Caves, Al Ayoun, Jordan*. Vertebrate Publishing

### **Other books**

*Troll Wall* - describes the first ascent of Europe's tallest, steepest north face in 1965. Vertebrate Publishing

*Adventures in the Northlands* - an e-book describing Tony's adventures in Alaska, Canada, Greenland, Iceland and Norway. Vertebrate Publishing

### **Website**

[www.nomadstravel.co.uk](http://www.nomadstravel.co.uk)  
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