

Following Moses

Neil Hallam joins a cycling group through the mountains and deserts of Jordan.



Wadi Mousa, or Moses Valley.

With only five, fairly short cycling days, I didn't expect Jordan to be a serious cycling trip. I am fascinated by the history of the holy land, so Exodus' Petra and Wadi Rum by bike trip had been on my list for a few years. Travelling with Exodus seemed appropriate, as our route followed Moses' exodus from Egypt to Mount Sinai.

Having never visited the Arab world, I arrived with some preconceptions; that Jordan would be an alien place, very different from Britain, there would be political unrest, it would be an oil rich state like Dubai and there would be flat expanses of sand like the Sahara Desert. All of these preconceptions would soon be changed as I travelled through Jordan.

The idea of an alien culture began to change at the airport when we were met by our guide Moayad. Dressed in traditional Arab Dishdashah coat and Shumag headscarf, it was a surprise to hear his flawless English.

Driving from the airport were more sights familiar to the British in our group; Burger King, KFC and regular police speed traps. Arriving at our hotel in Jordan's capital Amman, there were more parallels with

Britain. In common with most places we visited, English was widely spoken. I saw a Yellow Pages directory, complete with "let your fingers do the walking" motto. There was also a group of young Arabs wearing Benidorm-esque tour T-shirts with their names on the back. Unlike similar groups of British on tour, these youngsters were well behaved.

Leaving Amman by coach, I felt uneasy

at the armed police officer travelling with us. Moayad explained this is a normal precaution with groups of 10 or more. He told us about a stable political system, but as a result of Jordan's "naughty neighbours", tourist numbers have fallen by 60% since 9/11.

My preconception of an oil rich economy changed as Moayad described a mainly agricultural economy. Jordan has no oil



An Arab Johnny Depp.



Our fourth and longest ride gave a reminder that Jordan's deserts are still mountainous

industry. Although thanks to deposits of Oil Shale, it was responsible for the world's first oil trade, selling bitumen to the Pharaoh's for mummification.

The Cycling begins

We began our first ride at the Roman archaeological site of Jarash. This 42 kilometre ride took us across the Jacob River, giving our first brush with the Old Testament. My preconception of Jordan as a flat country also began to erode. The Jordan Valley forms part of Africa's Rift Valley and our ride took us into the foothills of this massive trench.

The cycling days were very staff intensive. Our guide Moayad, the coach driver and our police officer were joined by a three man cycle team and a police traffic car.

The police car would lead our convoy with lights flashing, while the team of two cycle leaders and a mechanic would look after us on the road.

Today's riding had a similar feel to parts of Snowdonia. Narrow roads snaked around ridges and valleys, with many short sharp climbs. Riding alongside our cycle leader Laith, I noticed his Dead to Red cycle top. This was a 240 kilometre race from the

Dead Sea to the Red Sea. I learned that Laith and his colleagues Mohammed and Waleed were semi-professionals from the national squad.

Throughout the ride Laith encouraged me with shouts of "Come on man". When I put a wheel slightly ahead of him, he said in very Americanised English "Are you challenging me man?" Laith shot off at a blistering pace with my lungs gasping at the effort of chasing him.

The Promised Land

Our second ride of 45 kilometres began on gently undulating roads to reach a viewpoint at Mount Nebo. This is said to be where God showed Moses the Promised Land. Looking out from the viewpoint I saw what it promised us, a 1200 meter hairpin descent to the Dead Sea.

Setting off behind our police car with 18 cyclists, a support truck and a coach, I felt like part of a racing peloton.

The road dropped steeply through moonscape scenery, passing herds of goats and donkeys. After stopping for photographs I had an exciting high speed descent to catch up with our convoy.

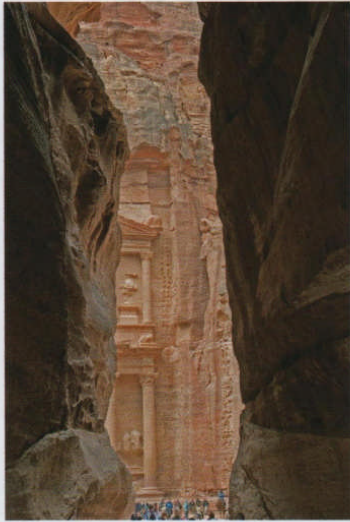
With hands aching from the brakes we

reached the Dead Sea at 400 meters below sea level. Here we relaxed floating in the buoyant water, reading newspapers in traditional fashion.



Our guide Moayad.

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The treasury comes into view.

Petra

A coach transfer took us to Petra, where we had a day off cycling. Petra is located in Wadi Mousa, or Moses Valley, providing another reminder of Jordan's biblical links. Moses' son Aaron is said to be buried on the valley's highest peak.

Petra has featured in Indiana Jones and countless documentaries, but I was still overwhelmed by the façade of the Treasury coming into view.

The Bedouin, who once lived in Petra, still sell souvenirs and camel rides in the site. As one group of camels thundered past, I was surprised to see Captain Jack Sparrow riding the lead camel. Or at least Johnny Depp's Bedouin doppelganger.

The next day we rode out of Wadi Mousa on a 20 kilometre return trip to Little Petra. This was historically a suburb of Petra, providing trading facilities for camel caravans. Before the modern road it was a perilous three hour trek between the two sites.

We fought a headwind as we rode steeply up and down past sandstone ridges and ancient Nabatean tombs. I caught Laith drafting behind me in a classic echelon formation. Once seen, he swapped places with me, but even with draft assistance I could not stay with the semi-pro rider across the toughest terrain so far.

Mountains and desert

Our fourth and longest ride at 60 kilometres, gave a reminder that Jordan's deserts are still mountainous.

We had a coach transfer to our start point at 1500 meters. But we were warned to expect seven big climbs. The weather had been pleasant, but cool. Today, at altitude, it felt very cold. Dressed in all our available kit we set out across the mountains.

After our fourth granny ring climb we checked our count with Laith, who replied "They are only small hills, they don't count".

Standing at the top of this small hill we were excited about the long hairpin decent ahead of us. Unfortunately, today's police escort decided 15 mph was an appropriate speed to descend this at. Our frustration lifted when we turned onto a desert road and our escort left us to enjoy the next 40 kilometres at our own pace.

Having lost our police escort, we gained the company of a local dog, who was to follow us up all seven of Laith's big climbs. These were just as tough as promised, with some of the group taking the option of riding in our following coach.

Standing on the pedals, in my lowest possible gear, our friendly dog was easily keeping pace with us. While re-grouping at the top, we would reward the dog with some of our water.

I looked out from the top of the climb to the prospect of a fast descent. But fantasies



Riding out of Wadi Mousa.



Laith relaxing at the lunch stop.



Riding into the promised land.

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Riding into Wadi Rum.

were altered by the reality of a pot holed road with sand and gravel accumulated on every bend.



Beware of camels.

We left the mountains around lunch time for a more typical desert landscape and higher temperatures.

Here Moayad prepared a tasty salad at the back of our support truck. While he chopped vegetables our bike leaders and more adventurous companions put the mountain bikes to work. An outcrop of sandstone provided a playground and break from road riding.

Refuelled, we set off with dog in pursuit for the final 20 kilometres to reach Jordan's main arterial road, the Wadi Arabia Highway. Here we loaded up the bikes and said goodbye to our canine companion for a coach ride to our final date with Moses.

The following morning we relaxed on one of Aquaba's coral beaches, pondering on where Moses might have crossed the Red Sea into Israel.

Lawrence of Arabia

Our morning on the beach was over too soon and we were back on our bikes heading into the desert again. The final ride

of our trip took us 30 kilometres into Wadi Rum. This is where Lawrence of Arabia and Prince Faisal assembled Arab troops to end Ottoman rule in the area.

Our last night in the desert was spent in traditional Bedouin tents. The local Bedouin entertained us with lute playing and a meal cooked in charcoal beneath the desert sand. The next morning our desert experience ended with a camel ride to our coach and a return to reality.

Should you go?

I was fascinated by Jordan and pleased I chose an organised trip to fit the many must do's into a week.

The big distances involved, especially crossing deserts would make cycling everywhere difficult. There is almost no railway and little public transport. But international car hire agencies abound, so day rides from different bases are possible.

English is widely spoken and I felt comfortable everywhere. Most importantly, I returned with experiences I will never forget.