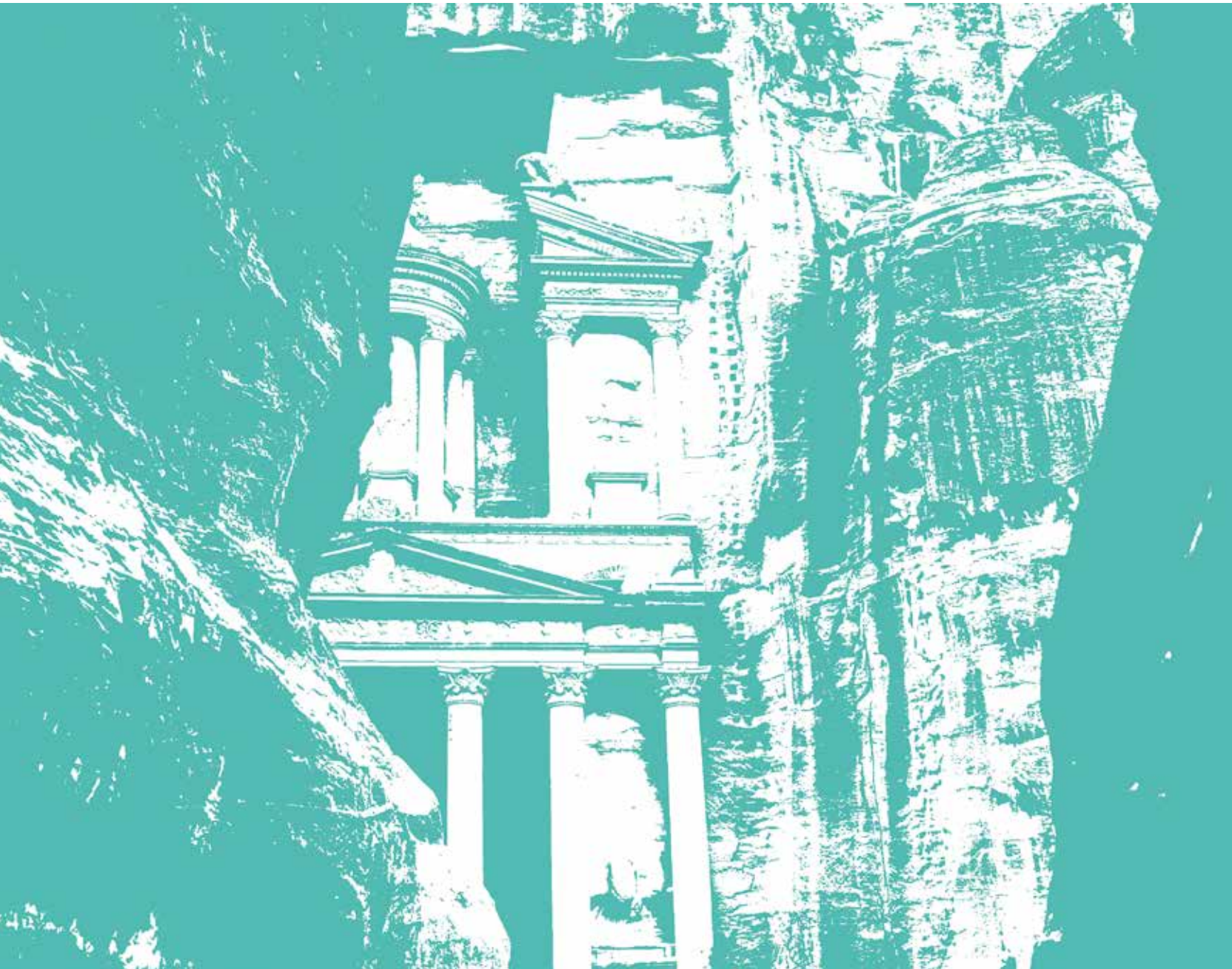




FOLLOWING BEDOUIN
PATHS THROUGH
ANCIENT PETRA

JESSICA NG

JORDAN



THEY TAMED THE SHIFTING
DUNE SANDS INTO WELL-
TRODDEN ROADS THAT LED
TO THE LOST CITY.

“We don’t live here anymore,” our Bedouin guide explained as he gestured in the general direction of his ancestral home, a cave in the sandstone rockface. We were retracing the paths that the Jordanian Bedouins of yore traversed on their way to the heart of the shifting city, the city in the sands, the city of many names: the Lost City, the Rose-Red City, Petra.

The Rose-Red City is built entirely of sandstone, from whence its myriad names were derived, its structures formed of the desert and by its people. A miracle to behold, Petra was a city split apart by tectonic forces, and its entrance and paths smoothed over time by dams built by the ancients to reroute the waters of Wadi Musa. The city was a wonder worked by the ancient Nabataeans who saw potential in its proximity to the incense trade route that flourished in the ancient world. They transformed the rose-hued cliffs of sandstone into cave homes, carvings, monuments, sepulchres and temples, and wove the city into the fabric of their newly crafted permanence.

The Nabataeans traded their nomadic past to settle down at the intersection-point of the routes of the great camel caravans. They tamed the shifting dune-sands into well-trodden roads that led to the Lost City.

In this city with approximately 2,500 years of history, the Bedouins, the descendants of the Nabataeans, lived in the caves in and around Petra for more than 500 years until they were forcibly relocated by the Jordanian government to the Umm Sayhoun village in 1985 when the city was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Some of the tribes stayed in the ancient city, while many abandoned their ancestral homes for industry and indoor plumbing. Hammoud, who was relocated with his family into the village during the resettlement, was our host during our two-night stay in the Bedouin village, and he was our guide through the ancient disused paths to Petra.

ALL ROADS LEAD TO PETRA

We arrived to the outskirts of Petra past midnight. Our driver Mahmood had collected us in Amman and we made the

BUBBLING WATER BROKE
THE SILENCE AND THE EARTHY SMELL
OF BLACK TEA MINGLED WITH THE
CRISP DRY AIR.



three-hour drive to Umm Sayhoun village in almost total darkness occasionally punctuated by unevenly spaced street lamps. The stillness outside complemented the stilted conversation in the car. “Would you like a croissant?” I asked to break the silence. He took it, slightly bemused, and I greatly embarrassed at the stale offering from Paris, where we had just arrived from.

“Come for a tea,” Mahmood warmly offered at the next rest stop, one of many along the mostly empty highways due to all the tea. It was here in a remote pit stop that we were introduced to the traditional Bedouin hospitality. Mahmood presented us to the shopkeeper, who in turn let us partake in his shisha. We spoke of many things, including the desert chill and desert fashion. They playfully dressed us up in a Bedouin coat and tightly wrapped a shemagh around our heads as wisps of hookah smoke permeated the intimate shop. The tasselled red-and-white shemagh contrasted sharply with the non-descript heavy brown coat. Wearing the thick materials, we were protected from the biting, dry desert cold that seeped straight to the bone, much as it had guarded the nomadic ancestors in bygone days.

Heady from the smoke that wound around us yet revitalised from the tea, we continued to Umm Sayhoun village. In the car, Mahmood shared stories of his family and life in the village as we gazed at the startlingly visible stars that guided us along the mostly pitch black roads. Upon arrival, we were greeted by a couple of donkeys rummaging through the trash outside Hammoud’s house and eventually laid our heads down to the braying of donkeys, barking of dogs, and other sounds of the village settling.

We met our host Hammoud the next morning as we sat down to the family-style breakfast. “The falafel came from the man down the street,” Hammoud explained. “Even people from Amman drive here to buy it.” He enticed us with this anecdote of the dish as he handed us cups of sweet mint tea. The table was laden with scrambled eggs, falafel, hummus doused with olive oil and sumac, labneh sprinkled with zaatar, chopped cucumbers and tomatoes, pickled carrots and olives, marinated local olives and pita bread. Dips of zaatar, olive oil, local preserves and marinated eggplant were also on-hand. The natural ingredients were full of flavour and we filled up on the

homemade food and local produce, as well as on the easy conversation with our host as he explained the plans for the day.

After breakfast, Hammoud handed us our picnic lunch before we hopped aboard his well-used truck. We rode through Little Petra and upwards through dirt roads, and tracks of rock and sand before alighting at the start of the disused route to the Lost City. To reach Petra from the high plateau of the north, Hammoud led us along the paths once frequented by Bedouins and that now mainly see the footfalls of trekkers and backpackers.

“Over there is the Wadi Araba Desert,” Hammoud pointed out as we took a now habitual tea break on the plateau. We had climbed further upwards to a lookout point that towered over deserts, and cliffs that cast shadows over the plains. A Bedouin couple had set up a small kiosk of imitation antiques and light refreshments alongside repurposed school chairs and benches near the edge of the cliff that invited trekkers to tarry. The bubbling water broke the silence and the earthy smell of black tea mingled with the crisp dry air. We silently sipped our tea while drinking in the view of the desert.

We set off again. Hammoud led us through cool ravines shaded by the towering cliffs as we descended from the plateau. Within an hour we were welcomed by the deserted Ad-Deir, the Monastery. We had taken the back way into Petra to arrive directly at one of the largest monuments in the Lost City. “It’s rare we’re the only ones here,” Hammoud jinxed a few seconds before a few tourists trickled in from the regular route favoured by guides. We bypassed the approximately 850 steps uphill, he explained of our backwards journey, and saved on backtracking to the entrance. We had sat down to Jordanian coffee at As Deir Restaurant, the cave café opposite the ancient site. The dark vacuous liquid bubbled in the cezve, and a punchy aroma of nuts and cardamon wafted up as we enjoyed the bitter brew.

The Hellenistic façade was bathed in mid-morning light. The façade of the Monastery and the monuments of Petra had been scrubbed raw by the sands on the desert winds and plumes of white sand carpeted the interiors, laid bare long ago by looters and tomb raiders.

THE DARK RIMMED EYES
DEEPENED AS THE WHITE TUFTS
ABOVE CAST SHADOWS OVER THE
LOOKOUT, MIMICKING HIS EYES
WHICH HAD CLOUDED OVER.

Petra had survived the rise and fall of one civilisation after another, as shown in the architectural heritage still standing. The Monastery was a larger but less refined version of the Treasury, and overlooked the Great Rift Valley and the River Jordan. The original structure was a Nabataean royal tomb but was converted to a temple during the Byzantine rule. What was left of the ancient site were the remains of a colonnade and a possible altar within a once round enclosure supposedly used for sacred ceremonies.

Freshly caffeinated, we continued on our way, going upstream against the increasing throngs of tourists and past the local vendors. Hammoud veered away from the main sites and led us along paths where few tourists ventured until we were once again alone. All around us was weather-worn rockface dotted with abandoned dwellings and sepulchres. "We spent our childhood here," Hammoud recounted nostalgically. His family was born in the caves, and they had grown up and played among the ruins. "We don't live here anymore," he concluded. Now, barely any of the Bedouin tribes live in the caves. No one cared about the caves around Petra until the Lost

City found its way on global lists.

We trekked upwards along the winding roads of the Wadi Farash Trail, marvelling at the gradient of rose-red sandstone, a permanent twilight compounded by time and forces of nature. Hammoud led us to a remote lookout with stunning vistas of the backroads of Petra. "We all know each other here," Hammoud stated as he introduced us to his friend. His compatriot had the wildness of youth, yet the hardships of an old soul, as reflected in his captivating kohl-lined eyes. We shared our picnic lunch of packaged hummus, pita and fresh produce, and he in turn offered us tea, a rare and precious liquid commodity especially considering the arduous trek uphill in the desert. The lookout was deserted, which did not bode well for the trinkets that he tried to hawk and the small café that he manned. "It is like this normally..." the man said, his voice carried away by the winds. The dark rimmed eyes deepened as the white tufts above cast shadows over the lookout, mimicking his eyes which had clouded over.

To reach the High Place of Sacrifice, we ascended steep shelves of rock that are not for the faint-hearted.





SPICES AND HERBS SUCH AS BAY
LEAVES, CINNAMON, GINGER,
ROSEMARY, SAGE, TURMERIC,
WORMWOOD, AND SEVEN TYPES
OF ZAAATAR STOCKED THE SHELVES.

We scaled along its spine and climbed among the boulders, the air thinning as we got higher. Then we reached the peak, Petra behind and the desert ahead. Blood drained from our faces from the high altitude and the gory history of this sacred site where the Nabateans performed ritual slaughters at the open-air altar. The intricate drainage system that was used to capture water was also used to channel the blood of sacrificial animals. The lofty perch afforded panoramic views of the city centre. The iron-rich stones glowed in the sunlight, while below the daily dramas of tourists and Bedouin industry in the Rose-Red City played out.

Using the local paths, we descended back into the land of the living and into the heart of the frenetic ancient city. From the nomadic life to one mired in industry, the Bedouins of Petra hawk their wares of handmade sand art forever encapsulated in glass bottles, and sell services and spices in the centre of the city.

The unassuming shack opposite the remains of the amphitheatre and at the centre of commerce is Petra Rosemary, with proprietor Mazen greeting visitors

with his gruff manner and deep knowledge of the history and lore of the area and his commodities.

“It’s my invention,” Mazen explained as he offered us cups of his house blend tea that soothed the throat and stomach. The proprietor had extended the Bedouin hospitality and had invited us in for tea. The shop is all perfume. The scents of the desert hang in the air: amber, frankincense, and myrrh in its states of matter of solid perfumes, liquid essential oils and vapours of smoke from the incense. Similar to its wares of frankincense and myrrh, Petra Rosemary boasted a nominal biblical background, rose for the Petra rose and Mary for the biblical mother.

“The Nabateans used to dry things because they last forever,” Mazen explained as he showed us the many spices and teas that filled porcelain bowls and hampers outside his shopfront and that lined the shelves of his intimate store. Mazen was continuing the almost 2,500-year-old tradition of the spice trade that built Petra when it served as the global crossroads where commodities from camel caravans exchanged hands. His shop was similarly laden with medicinal

teas, including chamomile, hibiscus and Bedouin tea for throat and stomach pains. Spices and herbs such as bay leaves, cinnamon, ginger, rosemary, sage, turmeric, wormwood, and seven types of zaatar stocked the shelves; and aromatics of musk and 100 types of incenses permeated the air.

Solid perfumes, such as amber, were favoured by the merchants who travelled to Petra as they had no water to wash themselves, Mazen joked with one of his many enlightening anecdotes. “Amber was also used as protection against mosquitos,” he added as they swarmed the nearby donkeys. He introduced other items in his Bedouin pharmacy as he rambled off the benefits of various resins, spices and teas. Frankincense, he explained, could be chewed all day and releases a sweetness as a natural gum. Mothers would steep a few pieces of frankincense in water until the liquid turned a milky white. They would feed a spoonful of the milky liquid to children with kidney issues twice a day and within a week the kidney disease would be healed. Myrrh was the miracle resin. The nomadic people of yore used to rub myrrh

on their bodies for its antibacterial properties and to mask bad smells. In addition to protecting the body from microbes and body odour, myrrh was burned in the temples to ward off the evil eye, or bad spirits.

We were not immune to his charm or the intoxicating heady fragrances. We went away with chamomile tea, essential rose oil, a small block of amber perfume and traditionally produced kohl, the ancestor of modern eyeliner. The tiny brass bottles of kohl were produced by grinding the charred remains of local olive trees, Mazen had elucidated.

Returning to the ruins, we finally made our way to Al Khazna, better known as the Treasury. Bullet holes riddled the facade of Al Khazna, a tomb for a long-gone Nabataean king. The misnomer of “the Treasury” derived from the belief that the giant urn carved above the entrance to the city’s most elaborate ruin contained hidden riches. Pockmarked by greed, the Treasury was once the target of hundreds of shots fired by local Bedouin tribes in hopes to dislodge the non-existent

THE PASSAGE OF THE YEARS,
THE SORCERY OF THE DESERT
WINDS, THE FORGETFULNESS
OF THE PEOPLE AND THE
INEVITABILITY OF PROGRESS HAD
HARDENED THE LOST CITY.



treasure. In actuality, the monument was an empty shell hewn into the sandstone cliff and the urn was of solid stone. The treasure was the edifice itself and the riches were as mythical as the Holy Grail.

The impressive façade was a statement of the Nabataean civilisation, as weary travellers and traders emerged into the bright sunlight from the dark 1200-metre-long gorge of Al Siq, or the shaft. Nature had split the sandstone rocks to create this almost biblical geological feature. The 200-metre-high walls permanently cast shadows over the dark and narrow road, a welcome respite for arriving guests into Petra. The long canyon, with its patchwork flooring of stone slabs, rock and sand patted down by millennia of foot traffic, led from the Bab Al Siq, or the gateway, at the entrance to the Lost City to the treasury. For the traders and travellers, and now tourists, the journey to Petra was no more than a necessary evil; the point was to arrive.

The rich history of the Lost City was still buried underground. The homes, markets and temples built of stone did not all survive the natural disasters that destroyed much of the ancient site over its millennia of existence. Only a small percentage of the city had been unearthed. So, Petra remains a place of untold secrets and treasures of

mythical proportions. The façades etched out into the sandstone cliffs survived through history and persisted beyond the many civilisations that tried to tame the landscape. The passage of the years, the sorcery of the desert winds, the forgetfulness of the people and the inevitability of progress had hardened the Lost City and its architecture. The once lost city had shed its mirage in an oasis where men could set down roots and reverted to the impermanence of tents that shielded excavation sites and uncompleted journeys.

We had reached the end of the tour, ending at the start of the road to Petra.

FOOLS AND KINGS

We returned to Hammoud's house on donkeys, or what are locally referred to as Bedouin Ferraris. Children playing on the street yelled in excitement as we trotted past, "Hello, hello! Where are you from?" The sights and sounds of village life were vibrantly illustrated with the friendliness of its people, the wildness of its livestock, and the deliciousness of its food.

That night, we feasted. Asma,

Hammoud's sister, prepared the traditional meal of mansaf, soup and salad. The mansaf of tender chicken marinated in a yogurt mixture was served over a bed of rice and Bedouin bread, both infused with the juices of the hearty dish. Stir-fried cauliflower with potatoes and other seasonal vegetables was served, along with a relatively mild lentil soup that contrasted well with the robust main course. After we had our fill, we continued the evening outside on the cool veranda. We spoke of many things over the digestif of sweetened sage tea and shisha.

Hammoud harboured the Bedouin dream of hidden riches. Here in the waterless wilderness, he spoke of the deep reserves of oil that flowed in underground reservoirs. The black rivers of petroleum flowed freely during repairs to water pipes that pumped the clear life liquid around the village.

The conversation was deep in thought and corruption. "We're forgotten by the government," Hammoud stated of the impoverished people in the area. The village and the country lacked the infrastructure to harness and develop the oil industry, he explained of Jordan's struggle behind the other petroleum-rich desert states. The bureaucrats were as backwards as the local

path into Petra. The government relied on tourism and on its abandoned people at Umm Sayhoun village, who maintained the ancient city and strived to continue the traditions that time forgot. The Bedouin tribes of the desert survived on tourist dollars instead of much needed government funding. A silence broke out as we contemplated on the irony of the conversation and a topic as deep as the time of the night.

"Only women take shisha here," Hammoud segued, eyeing the men in the party. The shisha had been brought over by his sisters, and they were the ones who were enjoying it with us. We chuckled at the subtle shade and were relieved at the lightened atmosphere. He had transported us back to his inviting veranda and the calming desert winds. We sat around the now effeminate hookah and sipped the ubiquitous tea. As the evening drew to a close, Hammoud concluded that people "come as a guest, [but] leave as a friend." And after the arduous but truly memorable 15.5-kilometre trek through the ancient city of Petra, we had truly become fast friends.