

THE BEST OF THE MIDDLE EAST

JORDAN

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If you fly into Amman, the first place I would head for is the Desert Loop, which stretches to the east of the capital towards Iraq. Tourists hardly ever visit, but there is an excellent road network and amazing castles which date back to the 8th century. Some people call them leisure palaces, and they have breathtaking mosaics and hamam complexes. The crusader castle of Al-Karak is one of the most spectacular. Then go north, to Irbid on the river Jordan, which is on the migratory route for birds flying to Europe. One of the best ways to explore is by bike – there are some incredible stretches of road. Head for Jerash, one of the world's most underestimated Roman sites, and then on to see the stunning mosaics at Madaba before freewheeling all the way down to the Rift Valley and on for a float in the Dead Sea.

Everyone who visits Jordan goes to Petra, but few find their way up to the High Place, the religious area at the top of the mountain. Dotted with carved obelisks, it looks down on the top of the Treasury; the walk up is beautiful. I'd then head to Little Petra, which few tourists know about – it was the women's caravanserai and has some of the best-preserved wall paintings in the whole valley complex.

But one of my favourite places in Jordan is Wadi Rum: it's so rich in history. It's almost a desert environment but – unlike the Sahara, which has always been traversed by very few people – it has been used as a thoroughfare for trading people for thousands of years. Camping out in Wadi Rum is the best way to experience traditional Bedouin hospitality: it's an unforgettable experience. And the history is awe-inspiring. People always focus on Jordan's Roman and Nabatean history, but it has the most amazing prehistoric rock art.

■ Exodus (0845 863 9600; exodus.co.uk) offers various group trips to Jordan, including a long weekend to Petra from £999, or a 12-day cycling tour from £1,239, both including flights. Other operators include Discover Jordan (0844 880 1013; discover-jordan.co.uk) and Cox and Kings (020 7873

5000; coxandkings.co.uk). Royal Jordanian (08719 112112; rj.com) flies from Heathrow to Amman from £190 return.

■ **IS IT SAFE?** The FCO does not advise against travel to Jordan and says most visits are trouble-free. Visas cost £8.60 on arrival. See visitjordan.com.