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### Petra: Jordan's Sculpted City

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By Steve Murray

Unlike Harrison Ford, who arrived on horseback, most people first encounter Petra by walking through the Siq, a narrow gorge that hides the park until its walls drop suddenly away like a magician's cape to reveal Al Khazneh (the Treasury). The people who made "Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade" knew how to create mystery when they filmed here. The Bedouin named the Treasury because the urns carved high on its sandstone wall were thought to contain money. Maybe they were right since the caravans that stopped here for more than 1,000 years made the city rich. It's a striking beginning to Petra Archaeological Park in southern Jordan.

Early arrivals get the park almost to themselves. Busloads of tourists won't arrive for a while, it's cool and the low angles of the sun bring out fine points in the building facades. But nobody beats the camels that will be sitting in the sand in front of the Al Khazneh, their owners waiting to carry visitors through the park for a fee.

Petra ("rock" in Greek) is a city of sandstone, and its intricate and eclectic facades have stood up well to centuries of use. A popular name for Petra is the "rose red city," but there really aren't good words to describe all the colors in these rocks. Try amber, bright orange, cream and gentle mocha, though, for starters.

Petra was the capital city of the Nabataeans, a nomadic Arab tribe with loosely bound trading territories from Arabia to Syria. They settled here by the sixth century B.C. and made Petra a major trading center

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By John Blanchette It was June 21, the summer solstice, and I was headed by train from the central Swiss city of Lucerne to the ski resort of Zermatt in southern Switzerland. It was a three-hour journey that ended in an escalating ride through the ...

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that linked China, India and southern Arabia with Egypt, Syria, Greece and Rome. Caravans mingled their beliefs as well as their goods here. Petra's walls show its religious evolution from idol worship through Byzantine Christianity to Islam. Petra remained independent until A.D. 106, when it was absorbed into the Roman Empire.

Exploring Petra can take some time. Centuries of occupation can't be covered in a day, although many try. The variety of detail on most buildings deserves contemplation that shouldn't be hurried. Archaeological sites are scattered over 65 acres, although most of the major sites lie along a main 2.5-mile path through a gorge, across a valley and up a hill. It's hard to get lost but easy to get tired.

Solitude is rare by midmorning. Voices from tour groups, students and families send up a medley of languages that echo off the stone walls. Horses, carriages and camels pass by carrying park visitors, both for necessity and for fun. This is likely what Petra sounded and felt like for the city's residents two millennia ago.

Petra was located at a natural crossroad for caravan routes, but the Nabataeans ensured its importance with the infrastructure to sustain its citizens and travelers in the desert: They carved stone channels through the city to capture precious water and built cisterns to store it. At its height, 30,000 people lived here.

Most of the buildings are tombs, so early explorers first thought Petra was only a necropolis. Nabataeans, however, like the Bedouin, had a nomadic heritage and lived in tents. Living was temporary; death was forever. Tomb decorations ranged from simple to elaborate based on the social status of the family that occupied them. What is here, then, is breathtaking funerary art. The centuries-long cascade of visitation and occupation is reflected in Doric and Corinthian designs with Arabic, Greek and Latin inscriptions.

The cliffs give way to a valley about two miles from the park entrance.

Roman occupation in the first century led to Roman building in Petra. Their building is most obvious here, with a colonnaded street and a theater that could accommodate 7,000 people.

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The main path ends at a pretty good restaurant with ethnic foods, beer — and shade. The Al-Deir Monastery, Petra's largest monument, is an 800-step hill climb beyond this, but after a good lunch, not everyone continues on.

An earthquake in A.D. 363 did major damage to many of Petra's structures, including its critical water system. The city survived into the seventh century but was gradually abandoned by A.D. 650 as trade routes moved elsewhere. The Crusaders came through and built citadels here in the 12th century, but eventually even they withdrew. Petra was abandoned and largely forgotten until 1812, when a Swiss explorer discovered it again.

Archaeological surveys began in 1839, with serious exploration starting in 1929. Petra is still an active archaeological site, and digs can sometimes be found in progress. Given the treasures on view already, it's amazing to think that archaeologists have surveyed only about 15 percent of Petra.

Today the only occupants of Petra are Bedouin families who live nearby, run park concessions and protect the site. Many set out blankets at strategic spots in the park and sell sand art, souvenir clothing and refreshments. Bedouin men serve as tour guides and animal drivers.

The park closes at 6 p.m., but ticket sales stop at 3. Crowds thin out rapidly in the late afternoon, which is another good time to enjoy the park in relative quiet. It's also a good reason to stay overnight, with the leisure that a multiday visit allows. By 5 p.m. the donkeys, horses and camels have all been taken in for the day or are finishing their last trips. Bedouin women are folding up their blankets and gathering their children.

As visitors exit ahead, it's possible to be left almost alone with the abandoned monuments and tombs. The low sun and relative quiet give a melancholy mood to the empty city – and a severe contrast across 15 centuries to when Petra was a desert metropolis.

#### WHEN YOU GO

Petra, Jordan's largest tourist attraction, is typically part of a longer vacation to Jordan or Israel. Bus tours, taxis or rental cars depart from Amman or Aqaba. Israel bus tours depart from Eilat.

The major sites of Petra Archaeological Park can be seen in a single hurried day. Spending the night, however, allows a more leisurely visit and the luxury of avoiding midday crowds.

The admission price is higher for single-day visitors (\$127) than for people staying over at Wadi Musa (\$70 to \$85). The park only accepts Jordanian dinars – no credit cards or other currencies.

The park is open 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. in summer and 6 a.m. to 4 p.m. in winter. Tours in English and Arabic start every half-hour from 7 a.m. to 3 p.m. and are well worth the price.

A very good website on Petra is [www.visitpetra.jo](http://www.visitpetra.jo). The Jordan Tourism Board has an excellent website about Petra and other attractions in the country at [www.visitjordan.com](http://www.visitjordan.com).

Summer is typically very hot, but winter can be surprisingly cold. For weather, September through November and March through May are the best times to visit.

Petra sees more than 500,000 visitors a year, so crowds can be an issue. The shoulder season – the nexus between few visitors and reasonable prices – is August through November.

Steve Murray is a freelance travel writer. To read features by other Creators Syndicate writers and cartoonists, visit the Creators Syndicate website at [www.creators.com](http://www.creators.com).

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