



Wild Globe Travel Consultancy

Tailored Wildlife, Wilderness and Adventure Travel Across the Globe.

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JORDAN

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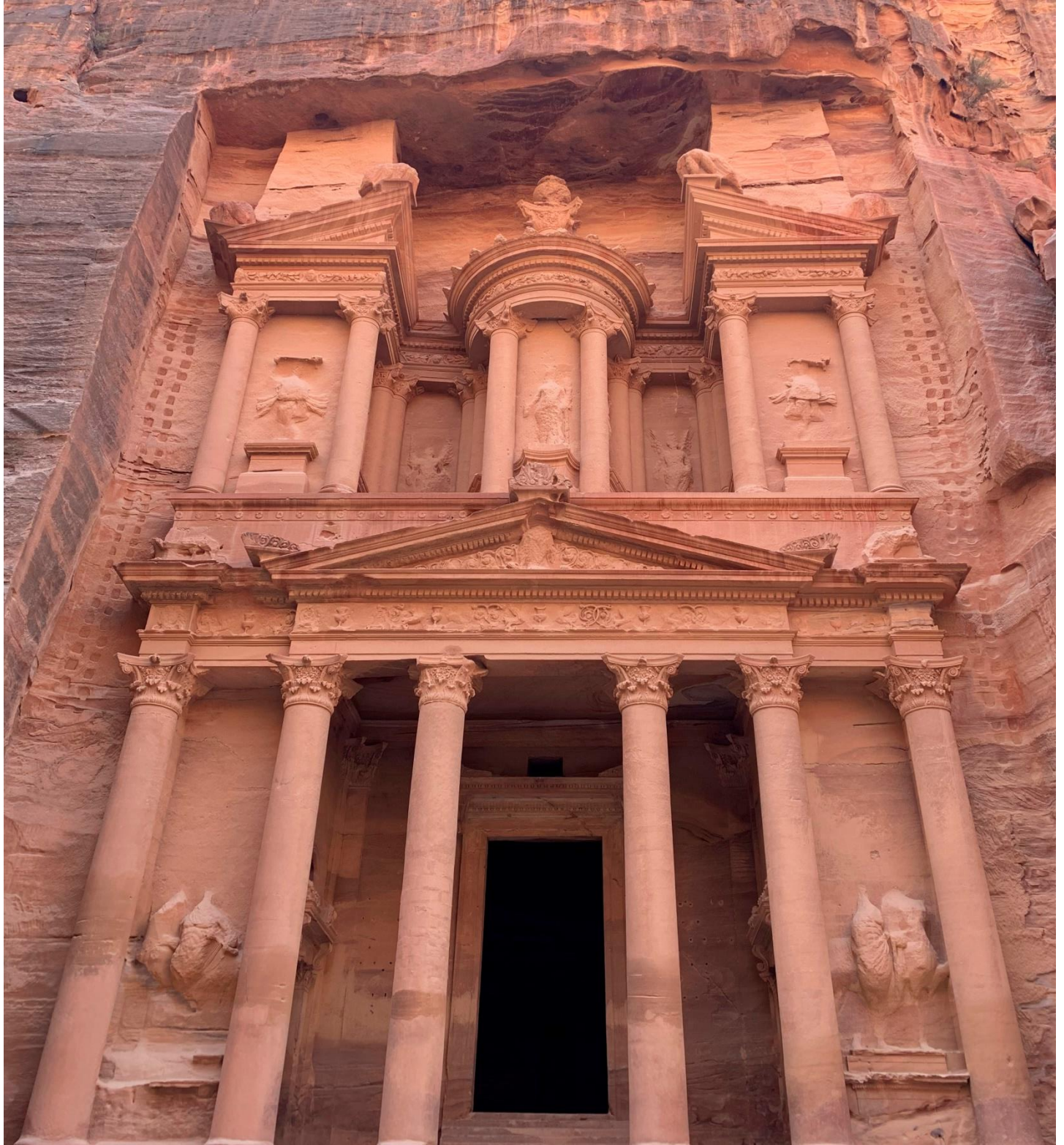
Duration - 10 Days

Destinations

Amman - Madaba - Petra - Wadi Rum - Azraq - Shaumari Wildlife Reserve - Azraq Wetland Reserve

Trip Overview

I have been trying to get back to Jordan for several years now, as this ravishing eternal land has always been my favourite part of the Middle East and is certainly one of my favourite destinations on the planet. Given my love for the arid places of this earth, I am entirely biased of course, but Jordan is an utterly unique destination whatever your predilection and the only aspect that comes even close to matching the spectacular landscapes, is the incredible hospitality of the people. My return has been delayed on a few occasions now, for a variety of unrelated reasons, and even this trip should have been considerably longer. As it was, I could not spare more than three weeks at an extremely busy stage of the year and consequently had to split the tour that I had originally planned between this initial exploratory stage and a longer stay in 2020. Neither trip would concentrate exclusively on wildlife, but my



ultimate intention is to select the most reliable areas in terms of potential mammals and to produce an itinerary that will introduce guests to the surprisingly varied wildlife of the region and will also support the essential conservation work taking place here. As my second research tour will include less time at the most popular tourist destinations, we may have slightly more success next year, as even I was surprised by how difficult mammals were to find and how few species we eventually encountered, certainly given the length of the tour and the time devoted to searching. The situation was probably not helped by the fact that I did not have my son James with me, or anyone else with spotlighting experience, but James will not be able to join me for the foreseeable future and I am instead teaching my colleague Karina Smith to assist, as Karina is already heavily involved in the administrative duties of the company and for a while now has expressed an interest in spending time in the field and learning about the wildlife. Jordan was her first specific mammal tour and although she is an absolute novice in the field, she has a great deal of enthusiasm for both the work and the animals and that can definitely go a long way. I will probably need to use more experienced local guides at some destinations,



particularly in extreme conditions, but there are other locations where Karina will certainly be able to assist, as she picks up the basic skills and knowledge required to work around wild animals. My return had been planned and organised in conjunction with the Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature or the RSCN as I will refer to this exceptionally important organisation throughout this and subsequent trip reports. Formed in 1966 to combat the unregulated hunting that has devastated so much wildlife across the Arab world, the RSCN are solely responsible for the creation and on going protection of a national network of reserves. There are currently eight major reserves in all, with several more planned, and although I would only be able to visit two on this first tour, the neighbouring Shaumari and Azraq reserves in the northeast, my second trip in 2020 will include the remaining six i.e. Mujib, Dana, Ajloun, Dibe'en, Yarmouk and Fifa. In addition, the RSCN are involved in the continued conservation of the Wadi Rum Protected

Area, which is administered by the local authorities in Aqaba. As I was initially concentrating on the southern part of the country, I had been able to include Wadi Rum on this preliminary tour and in 2002 the RSCN were responsible for reintroducing a herd of Arabian oryx to this most famous of all Jordanian deserts. I had arranged to visit the Oryx reserve during my stay and will discuss the reintroduction programme in greater detail later in this report. However, the fact that these magnificent animals even exist in Jordan today is entirely due to the remarkable foresight and tenacious conservation efforts of the RSCN, as there were no protected areas in Jordan until they were responsible for the creation of the Shaumari Wildlife Reserve in 1975 and sadly that was also the case across much of the Middle East. Shaumari was very much an oasis of hope amid a desert of apathy and more than four decades later the RSCN are still leading the way in terms of the significant environmental issues that continue to plague the region. Conserving biodiversity has always been their foremost priority and in addition to the vital reserves that they continue to maintain, the RSCN has



established successful captive breeding programmes regarding a number of endangered animals. Over time they have developed enhanced initiatives that concentrate more on the protection of habitat than any single species and these long-term projects are operated in partnership with local communities, many of which are in poor, rural areas. Jobs and commerce are intrinsically linked to the protection of the land, with the RSCN employing local people and selling their beautifully crafted goods and organic food under the Wild Jordan brand at each of their major reserves. There are also shops at the stunning Wild Jordan Center overlooking old Amman, as well as the City Mall and at Queen Alia International Airport. The many exclusively handmade products include ceramics, jewellery, candles, soap, embroidery and a number of Dead Sea body care products, not to mention a range of delicious regional teas. If you would like to support this dynamic and pioneering enterprise, and at the same time help to preserve the threatened wildlife of this ancient country, please visit the Wild Jordan website (www.wildjordancraft.com) for further details. The RSCN are also heavily involved in ecotourism and operate impressive lodges at four of their main reserves, from where all of their protected areas can easily be reached. Although inexpensive, the lodges are well maintained and are situated in some of the best locations in the country. All provide good quality fresh meals, again at reasonable prices, and all offer a variety of activities and the opportunity to explore each reserve, usually on foot via an extensive trail system. School visits are a particular priority as part of a national education programme and the RSCN have gone further by introducing environmental concepts to the school curricular, to ensure that these fundamental issues are now taught and discussed in the classroom and not only during organised trips to the reserves. A ground-breaking conservation and ecotourism training regime has been implemented at the Royal Academy for Nature Conservation, a world-class resource constructed near Ajloun Forest Reserve. Built on the site of an abandoned quarry and completely unique in the Arab world, the academy opened in 2015 and will be used to train generations of rangers and guides in a variety of subjects associated with sustainable tourism and the protection of both habitat and wildlife. I will be visiting this acclaimed centre on my return to the country in 2020, but it would be impossible to research all of the projects that the RSCN have been involved in or to learn of the immense good that has been achieved since its foundation over 50 years ago. Entire species have been saved and lives have been changed by their singular efforts and I am intensely proud to count myself a member of this innovative and extraordinary organisation. I am hoping that my initial research will enable me to organise customised tours to the country, not only to assist with the laudable and

downright critical conservation work taking place at the RSCN reserves, but also to draw attention to Jordan itself as a feasible wildlife destination. As is generally the case, the key will be how successful I am at finding major mammal species, for although Jordan is already a superb destination in terms of its rich cultural heritage and timeless spellbinding landscapes, all of my tours include a significant element of wildlife viewing and it is therefore going to be essential to identify some reliable areas for at least a few of the main species. Whilst I did enjoy some spectacular sightings on this first trip, in general wild animals, and specifically mammals, were extremely difficult to find and of the nine species observed in ten days, three were encountered at an enclosed reserve and a fourth was the domestic water buffalo, albeit feral versions living natural wild lives. To be entirely fair, I could only include two reserves on this abbreviated itinerary and for less than three full days in all, but I had still expected to see more, particularly in terms



of our stay at Wadi Rum and the desert specialists that occur there. Low densities were anticipated given the largely arid regions explored and the severe conservation issues experienced in this part of the world, but even I was surprised by just how few individual animals were encountered, certainly if you exclude the reintroduced Arabian oryx. No wildlife could be described as common and to find just one single jerboa on a trip of this kind almost beggars belief. Given that more or less my entire stay will be devoted to the remaining six RSCN reserves, I am hopeful that my forthcoming visit will prove to be more productive and that I will have a better understanding of exactly where I need to concentrate future tours. That is the intention of course, as I know from previous experience that Jordan has the potential to be an outstanding ecotourism destination and that a great deal of captivating wildlife occurs here, including no less than sixteen species of carnivore. For the record, and before I move on to our first destination, for the purposes of this trip report I am including Jordan as part of Arabia. I am aware that technically this is not correct and that Jordan is not one of the seven countries within the geographical boundary of the Arabian Peninsula. However, it borders the largest of the seven, Saudi Arabia, and although in my mind there has always been a clear distinction between Arabia and what is commonly known as the Arab world, which is generally accepted to include the 22 Arabic speaking nations in North Africa and the Middle East, to me no such distinction exists geographically between Jordan and Saudi. The two states may have vastly different beliefs, values and laws in many



cases, but the land itself is fundamentally the same, regardless of the irrelevant borders drawn up by men, and Jordan will always be part of Arabia as far as I am concerned. As it was, our first destination was probably the most famous in the entire region, however you define it, as the ancient city of Petra has been enchanting visitors since its discovery by the Swiss explorer Johann Ludwig Burckhardt in 1812. A UNESCO cultural World Heritage Site and one of the 'New 7 Wonders of the World', as chosen by hundreds of millions of voters across the globe, the area around Petra has been inhabited for thousands of years and the city itself dates back to around the second century BC. Superbly situated in terms of a plentiful water supply from the nearby spring at Wadi Musa and well established trade routes, Aqaba and the Red Sea lie a short distance to the south, Petra was constructed by the Nabataean people, a formerly nomadic tribe of Arabs who settled and made Petra the heart of their kingdom until they were defeated by the Roman Empire in AD 106. The city continued to thrive under Roman rule until a massive earthquake devastated much of the site in AD 363, including the ingenious water management system, and by Byzantine times trade had diminished to such an extent that this once prosperous city lay abandoned by around the mid 7th century. Excluding a momentary revival during the Crusades, a series of religious conflicts or holy wars between the Christian and Muslim faiths between 1096 and 1291, this remained the case until Burckhardt, fluent in Arabic and masquerading as an Arab, persuaded his local Bedouin guide to take him to see the old ruins over a thousand years later. Burckhardt would die of dysentery just five years later in Cairo, where he was buried as a Muslim, but his rediscovery of this beguiling and long forgotten masterpiece was the start of the Western world's fascination with an ancient wonder that is also known as the Rose City, due to the colour of the sandstone from which it is so elaborately carved. Many tourists do not realise this about Petra until they actually visit, that the city is less constructed in the typical sense and more sculpted from the ageless pink rock face. The imposing facades, although spectacular and exquisitely fashioned, largely conceal plain unadorned rooms with generally little depth. The Treasury is the most renowned, and probably one of the most photographed buildings or monuments on the planet, but there are many other treasures here and the real genius of the Nabataeans was their innovative water storage system, exactly as you might expect from a gifted nomadic race who had to rely on a constant water source for their very survival. Having devised an elaborate system of dams, underground water cisterns, covered tanks and water channels, not to mention the particle settling basins utilised to purify the water, the Nabataeans were able to maintain a constant water supply throughout the year, regardless of the season or any rainfall. Although the main source of the supply was the spring at Wadi Musa, several kilometres beyond the city, by demonstrating a clearly advanced understanding of hydraulic engineering, they designed an intricate ceramic pipeline sloped at precisely the 4 degree angle required to provide sufficient pressure to deliver constant water to a massive urban settlement, without raising the pressure too high and thereby inevitably creating leaks along the extensive pipework. That this early hydraulic system provided Petra with fresh water for several centuries is testament to the supreme skill and ingenuity involved in its creation and much the same can be said of the buildings themselves and the precautions taken to protect them, as this is one of the most hostile environments on earth and flash floods can cause extreme damage among the narrow sandstone canyons and gorges of the city centre. However, the Nabataeans were nothing if not resourceful and even prepared for this eventuality by creating a sophisticated network of dams, reservoirs and run offs, some of which survive intact today, all designed to work in unison in order to protect the Treasury. As a feat of engineering it is every bit as impressive as the construction of the Treasury itself, which has in turn survived millennia in this parched and inhospitable region, as well as several major earthquakes. Hewn from the top down to avoid damaging any of the completed sections, this is the most famous landmark in all of Petra, although it was probably conceived as a mausoleum and was only later named Al Khazneh, or the Treasury, by the Bedouin, who, according to one local legend at least, believed that it concealed the lost treasure of a pharaoh. Many visitors recognise the iconic facade from 'Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade', the third Indiana Jones film, where Harrison Ford's Indy is joined by his father, played by Sean Connery, in a quest to



locate the Holy Grail. All of the Indiana Jones movies were directed by Steven Spielberg and it is perhaps no coincidence that my first introduction to Petra was in a much earlier film written and produced by someone who had a major influence on Spielberg's career, the stop-motion special effects genius Ray Harryhausen. Released in 1977, 22 years before Spielberg would film the Last Crusade at the same location, 'Sinbad and the Eye of the Tiger' was Harryhausen's penultimate film and one of the early scenes was shot at the Treasury, although I did not realise it as I watched enthralled as a young boy. Whilst I generally encourage guests to discover these ancient sites for themselves, I would recommend that you spend at least two days here, as Petra has a great deal more to offer than the Treasury and people visiting for just a single day will miss many highlights that they do not even know exist. Most tourists will enter



the city through the Siq, a natural, narrow winding canyon that leads directly to the Treasury and the myriad wonders beyond. This makes complete sense as a basic introduction to the site and will take visitors past the Theatre to the Great Temple in the heart of the city, via a short detour for the Royal Tombs. Almost entirely carved out of the surrounding cliffs, the amphitheatre is particularly spectacular and its three sections of stone seats could accommodate several thousand spectators. This route will also include a Byzantine era church, a significantly later addition with a superb collection of beautiful floor mosaics, as well as Qasr al-Bint, an important temple and one of the few constructed buildings that remains more or less intact, and the Temple of the Winged Lions, which was less fortunate and was largely destroyed by the earthquake of AD 363. Although this is the traditional way to access Petra and can include more or less as many additional highlights as your time permits, there is a great deal more to this magnificent lost civilization than a procession of tourists all walking in the same direction and my own preference is to hike in across the desert and climb up through the twisting mountain paths until you reach Ad Deir, or the Monastery, which I believe rivals the Treasury as the



most impressive structure in the entire complex. At around thirteen kilometres this is an exceptional hike within a truly memorable landscape and, best of all, if you depart early in the morning there are generally no other tourists until you reach Ad Deir. Sadly, that will not be the case if you decide to take the Petra by Night tour, which only operates on Monday, Wednesday and Thursday and is always busy. It can still be a nice experience despite the crowds, as the corridor through the Siq is illuminated by hundreds of candles and more candles and a brief light show await you at the Treasury. Other options include carriage and horse or donkey rides during the day, which I appreciate can occasionally be useful if someone is perhaps struggling in the midday sun. However, although conditions for the horses and donkeys have improved over the years, cruelty still occurs and I could never recommend these activities. Tiny donkeys are still being forced to carry large tourists up steep mountain paths in extreme heat and whilst some owners clearly do care about their animals, we observed two examples of cruelty involving young boys and the donkeys in their care, both of which we reported. I would urge all visitors to do the same, as we did receive a hopeful response and every complaint helps to ensure a better life for these long-suffering animals. If you do feel the need to use either a horse or donkey, please check them carefully for any signs of mistreatment and under no circumstances should you ever agree to use an animal that already appears to be exhausted. For the record, and in case you are not travelling any further south, Petra is a short drive from the Dana Biosphere Reserve, one of the six RSCN reserves that I will be visiting when I return to Jordan in 2020. As it was, on this occasion we did have an appointment to the south and from probably the most famous destination in all of Arabia we journeyed on to my own personal favourite, the incomparable Wadi Rum. For those who are not aware, the Arabic word wadi translates as valley, but in more general use the term wadi applies to a valley or riverbed that is dry for most of the year and only receives seasonal rain. Wadi Rum or the Valley of the Moon as it is also known, is the largest wadi in Jordan and is another UNESCO World Heritage Site, but, unlike Petra, is a mixed cultural and natural site. At around 742 km², the Wadi Rum Protected Area, as it is officially known, is more than twice the size of the largest of all of the RSCN conservation properties, the aforementioned Dana Biosphere Reserve. It is bordered by Saudi Arabia to the south and Aqaba, the gateway to the ancient trading routes of the Red Sea, lies just a few kilometres to the west as the camel trots. Numerous significant archaeological sites and literally thousands of petroglyphs and inscriptions testify to at least 12,000 years of continual human occupation and this epic and eternal landscape is once again home to the same Arabian oryx that were carved into the soft sandstone by our ancestors thousands of years ago. It is a sad but unavoidable fact that, with a few notable exceptions, the



Arab world has shown very little interest in conserving its wildlife, endemic or otherwise, and has one of the worst environmental records on the planet. Many species, particularly large carnivores and ungulates, have been hunted to the point of extinction and some tragically beyond. Initially believed to be a subspecies of the dorcas gazelle, the Saudi gazelle was officially declared extinct in 2008, just a few years after genetic analysis had confirmed that it was actually a distinct species. There were thought to be captive populations at one stage, but these all proved to be different species or hybrids and the Saudi gazelle had been lost to the world forever with barely anyone noticing. The same ignominious fate could have so easily befallen the Arabian oryx, which was formally classified as extinct in the wild by the early 1970s. Fortunately, the remaining captive animals were genetically pure, thanks largely to the foresight of the Fauna Preservation Society, or Fauna and Flora International as they are now known, who, in combination with the World Wildlife Fund, launched Operation Oryx in 1962. Under the command of Kenya's chief game warden Major Ian Grimwood, their ambitious plan was to trap a few of the last surviving oryx in the wild and establish a breeding herd in captivity. Four animals were originally captured in what is now Yemen and although one died, two males and a female were shipped to their new home at Phoenix Zoo in June 1962. However successful the initial operation had been, three animals were never likely to produce a viable population and a further six oryx were donated by London Zoo and private collections in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. The 'World Herd' consequently totalled just nine and in October 1963 this was increased by perhaps the most significant margin the species has ever known, when a solitary male calf was born. Worryingly at the time, the first six births were actually all males, but eventually female calves were also produced and as the herd slowly increased in size, animals were moved to other zoos in order to promote genetic diversity and to safeguard the population against a catastrophic disease or a single natural disaster. Meanwhile, the RSCN

were making their own contribution to the continued existence of what is Jordan's national animal and had established the country's first nature reserve at Shaumari. Originally conceived as a breeding centre for locally extinct species, and specifically the Arabian oryx, the sanctuary opened in 1975 and three years later four oryx arrived from Phoenix Zoo. They were released into the breeding enclosures that had been prepared for exactly this purpose and within a further five years a herd of 31 oryx were reintroduced into the main Shaumari reserve. Since then a second breeding population has been established at Wadi Rum and a number of oryx have been released beyond the fences of that reserve. It may only be a small victory in the scheme of the environmental catastrophes that continue to plague our planet, but it is a victory nonetheless and today Arabian oryx are walking free across the timeless desert sand for the first time since the 1930s. Furthermore, the International Union for Conservation of Nature, or the IUCN as this globally recognised organisation is more commonly known, has been able to downgrade the conservation status of these elegant antelopes from extinct in the wild to merely vulnerable. There are probably still fewer than a thousand mature adults surviving in the wild today and all of these occur in tiny fragmented populations, but the fact that they exist at all is testimony to what can be achieved with



sufficient goodwill and the RSCN are trying to ensure that all of Jordan's wildlife is afforded the same basic opportunity. I would add, that in discussing the mechanics of their conservation, it is all too easy to ignore the incredible majesty and poise of these supreme desert specialists, as well as the utter joy of observing them in their natural habitat. We visited the oryx reserves at both Wadi Rum and Shaumari and at the former we were introduced to another important RSCN initiative involving the Asian houbara, a species of bustard that is also struggling across much of its range. Between 2014 and 2016 800 bustards were released in Jordan as part of a coordinated regional effort and in May 2016 an RSCN field team discovered a first nest with three eggs. Further nests and eggs have since been observed and although both the project and the species still have a long way to go, these are extremely hopeful indications of another success story. We were fortunate to find a group of four of these striking but generally elusive birds, as they are extremely well camouflaged and I doubt that we would have seen any without the enthusiastic assistance of the RSCN ranger who is working with them here. As I understand has been the case for so many people over the years, I owe my fascination for Wadi Rum to the consummate English film director and screenwriter David Lean, whose sixteen feature films include some of the greatest cinema of all time and undoubtedly several masterpieces. Indeed, 'Brief Encounter', 'Great Expectations', 'Oliver Twist', 'The Bridge on the River Kwai', 'Doctor Zhivago', 'Ryan's Daughter' and 'A Passage to India' were all directed and in some cases written by David Lean and of course the film that introduced the world to Wadi Rum was 'Lawrence of Arabia'. With a screenplay by the equally gifted playwright and screenwriter Robert Bolt, who would go on to win Best Adapted Screenplay Academy Awards for 'Doctor Zhivago' and 'A Man for All Seasons', which was actually adapted from his own play, the film already had a certain gravitas and a legendary triumvirate was sealed when the absurdly talented and wonderfully charismatic Peter O'Toole agreed to take the lead role of Lawrence. For those who are not aware, 'Lawrence of Arabia' is based on the extraordinary life and writings of T.E. Lawrence, a British army officer who, among many remarkable endeavours and heroic exploits, played a major role in the Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Empire during the First World War. A close adviser and friend to Emir Faisal, one of the Arab leaders of the revolt, Lawrence earned a reputation as a brilliant military strategist, but he also led or participated in multiple attacks on the Ottoman forces and was largely responsible for the surprise attack that led to the capture of Aqaba in July 1917. A staunch advocate of Arab independence, with the full backing of the British government, Lawrence had promised the Arabs their own autonomous state if they would help to defeat the Turks and the Ottoman Empire could be overthrown. However, at probably the same time they were marvelling at the tactical nous displayed by Lawrence in order to convince the Arabs to fight on behalf of the Allies, the British and

the French were finalising a secret agreement that would carve up the Middle East between the two European powers, with barely a thought to the indigenous Arabs, who mistakenly believed that they were fighting and dying for their freedom. Long before the end of the war, Lawrence was clearly aware of this betrayal and wrote this missive in his notebook almost exactly a month before the fall of Aqaba:

'We are calling them to fight for us on a lie, and I can't stand it.'

Although it was omitted on the advice of the playwright George Bernard Shaw when the first edition was published in 1926, Lawrence went a great deal further in the Introductory Chapter of 'Seven Pillars of Wisdom', his seminal work on his wartime experiences. The chapter was eventually included after his death in a motorcycle accident in 1935 and throws a great deal more light on a subject that still appeared to haunt him:

'So I had to join the conspiracy, and, for what my word was worth, assured the men of their reward. In our two years' partnership under fire they grew accustomed to believing me and to think my Government, like myself, sincere. In this hope they performed some fine things, but, of course, instead of being proud of what we did together, I was continually and bitterly ashamed.'

I would urge anyone interested in either Lawrence himself or the history of Arabia to read the 'Seven Pillars of Wisdom' and whether you believe that he was sincere or not in his regret, it should be noted that Lawrence refused both the Victoria Cross and a knighthood as a result of the underhand treatment of the Arabs after the war. To me, T.E. Lawrence remains a Boy's Own hero, a gentleman adventurer who set out on his own at age twenty and travelled 1,000 miles on foot to survey the crusader castles of Ottoman Syria. With no little assistance from Peter O'Toole's good looks and piercing blue eyes, this is how David Lean's epic adventure captures this highly complex character and although the film is not completely historically accurate, it is reasonably close and does portray at least the essence of the man. The scene where Sherif Ali, played by Omar Sharif, approaches his well on camelback across the shimmering sand, is probably one of the most famous in cinematic history and although Lean won only two of the seven Best Director Academy Awards that he was nominated for, it makes sense that his triumphs were for 'The Bridge on the River Kwai' and 'Lawrence of Arabia', which I consider to be his finest films. It was originally intended that the entire production would take place in Jordan, but later scenes were also shot in Morocco and Spain and locations at both Aqaba and Petra had to be abandoned, apparently



due to spiralling costs. Thankfully, many of the scenes at Wadi Rum had already been filmed, as the breathtaking desert vistas are the real star of the show and it is no surprise that one of the film's seven Academy Awards was won for its glorious cinematography. It is difficult to photograph or film anything badly on the Valley of the Moon and it has even been suggested that Lean's masterpiece was responsible for the beginning of an economically viable tourist industry in Jordan. Certainly many other films have been shot at Wadi Rum since, including Red Planet, which, as the name suggests, was set on Mars, 'Prometheus', from the Ridley Scott Alien canon, the second of the five Transformers movies to date, and 'The Martian', another Ridley Scott production where Wadi Rum again doubles as the surface of Mars. Two of the recent films in the Star Wars franchise have also had scenes shot here, 'Rogue One' and 'The Rise

of Skywalker', as well as the forthcoming 'Dune' remake by Denis Villeneuve, who also directed 'Sicario' and 'Blade Runner 2049'. Lawrence himself described Rum as '*vast, echoing and Godlike*' and we would find traces of both the man and the myth throughout our stay and well beyond the enthralling landscapes of Wadi Rum. At times we walked in his footsteps, sharing locations where he was known to have stayed. However, I made a point of never simply following the crowds, as my love is for the desert itself and to me Wadi Rum is an enduring, haunting spectacle and far more significant than any single person or indeed any single people. With its extraordinary light and endless red tinged, sun burnished valleys, it has always been easy to describe Wadi Rum as visually breathtaking, but it is the serene ambiance that is truly unique and staying here can be an evocative almost spiritual experience, although in a mystical sense rather than in terms of any forced religious connotations. Much of course depends on how you visit and



whether you permit yourself to succumb to the perpetual rhythm of this ageless place. You may believe that you will see more by rushing from one attraction to another with the rest of the busy tourists on hectic one-night stays, but in reality you will see far less and will leave with no better understanding of one of the natural wonders of this earth. I was disappointed that I only had four nights here, but they were all spent sleeping out in the desert, with just bedrolls between us and the sand and only dreams between us and the stars. At night tents will only spoil the view and during the day it is best to climb up to a high place and watch as the desert basks in a soft golden light and the burning red sun falls out of the sky. Wadi Rum is actually known for the quality of its climbing and when you first arrive it somewhat resembles one huge playground, with literally thousands of rocks and peaks just waiting to be scaled. The local Zalabia Bedouin have been living and hunting amid these inviting massifs for centuries and are entirely at ease among the

towering cliffs and rocky escarpments. Incredibly skilled and naturally dexterous, they have been guiding climbing enthusiasts from all over the world for several decades and in 1987 the British climber Tony Howard published 'Treks and Climbs in Wadi Rum, Jordan', detailing some of the most memorable and demanding ascents. The guide I was with has climbed with Tony and although I have also climbed previously, I more wanted to explore Rum at my leisure, rather than dedicate my relatively short stay to any one serious activity. As such, we did a great deal of scrambling, which is pretty much as it sounds, an activity somewhere between hiking and rock climbing, where you often need to use your hands to navigate steep or more challenging sections. It is usually more relaxed and far less technical than rock climbing and I have been doing it since I was a child, long before I was aware that it even had a name. Much like hiking, it can still be strenuous and three of the routes we chose took several hours, including plenty of more or less obligatory breaks for photographs and longer stops to simply sit in peace and savour the deafening solitude. The Jebel Burdah hike, up to and beyond the famous rock bridge, involved an element of scrambling and I was comfortable enough to decline the safety harness that I was offered for the final section. Most of our other ascents were really just glorified hikes in terms of difficulty, but every desert landscape is more beguiling than the last and the 360 degree panoramic view from the summit of Jabal Umm ad Dami simply has to



be experienced in person to be believed. Situated on the border with Saudi Arabia, Jabal Umm ad Dami is the highest mountain in Jordan and at the very top it is almost impossible not to feel like an insignificant speck in the infinite, which of course we all are. Within these epic surroundings I was hoping to find the equally majestic Nubian Ibex, which was all but extinct in Jordan until the RSCN launched a captive breeding programme and the species was reintroduced to the Mujib Biosphere Reserve in 1998. There are now several small populations, including at Wadi Rum, and although I did not have sufficient time to search for them on this occasion, I hope to do better next year and will make a concerted effort at either the Mujib or Dana reserves. Whilst I did not visit Wadi Rum specifically to look for wildlife, I did devote as much time as possible to the cause, particularly at night and in the early morning, as it was almost impossible to search for animals during the day, partly due to the intense heat and partly because the local guides are just not used to looking for wildlife with guests and make far too much noise. At night I searched with Karina as she started to learn how to spotlight and while she slept in the morning, I would slip away before first light and find a high vantage point to climb and scan from. It has to be said that both methods enjoyed only extremely limited success, as I did see a couple of red foxes before the sun had cleared the surrounding mountains and on our very first spotlighting session we found three desert hedgehogs within a few minutes and no more than 200 metres of each other. Sadly though, that was about it, except for a lot of tracks and an absolutely superb Arabian horned viper, which was discovered in close proximity to where we would be sleeping. Nice to know at least that you have such an impressive serpent guarding you at night. I think that we also probably encountered a sand cat, as I picked up eyeshine in the distance and the animal in question was certainly the right size and was behaving far more like a timid cautious cat than a basically dopey inquisitive dog. Unfortunately, we lost it before I was able to get close enough to confirm and I was left to reflect that it is going to take a very long time to replicate the almost telepathic understanding that I had with James in terms of working together at night. There was hope on the horizon of course, for as much as I hate to leave Wadi Rum, our next destination would be Shaumari Wildlife Reserve, the first and consequently the oldest reserve in Jordan. It is very unusual that I will reach the first wildlife destination of a tour on day eight, but that occurred on this occasion and was a consequence of having to divide my original itinerary in two. My second trip will largely feature exclusively wildlife destinations, but for now I was hoping that Shaumari would provide us



with at least reasonable views of the three ungulates that are conserved here, the Arabian oryx, which we had already seen, the Asiatic wild ass and the Arabian sand gazelle. Tragically, the admirable conservation efforts taking place at Shaumari have come far too late to save the endemic wild ass, as the Syrian wild ass subspecies, *equus hemionus hemippus*, that once roamed Jordan is now extinct. The last known wild animal was shot in 1927 and has been replaced in Jordan and other areas across the Middle East by the Persian wild ass subspecies *equus hemionus onager*. As they both belong to the same main species, no actual extinction has occurred, but of course the reality is that all subspecies are different in certain respects and we have actually lost another species that the world barely knew, let alone remembers. Initially created as a breeding centre, specifically to facilitate the local reintroduction of the Arabian oryx, Shaumari is not a large reserve and its 22 km² equates to around 7% of the Dana Biosphere Reserve, the largest official reserve in Jordan at 320 km². Despite its size, Shaumari remains an important facility and is home to a population of Arabian sand gazelles, which now only occur in Jordan in extremely low densities. Until 2010 the Jordanian version was considered to be a subspecies of the goitered gazelle, *gazella subgutturosa*, which had an extensive range from Jordan and Syria in the west to China and Mongolia in the east. However, genetic studies have since indicated that the population in the extreme west, so in Jordan and across the Arabian Peninsula, is actually a distinct species, which has been named, rather appropriately, the Arabian sand gazelle or *gazelle marica*. The gazelles reintroduced as part of a breeding programme at Shaumari were all sourced from neighbouring Saudi Arabia and it is now possible to search for them, as well as the many other species that occur here, in an open safari vehicle. Apart from a few captive animals at the state of the art visitor centre, all of the wildlife at Shaumari is free to roam unhindered and some species can be surprisingly difficult to find, despite the size of the reserve and the fact that it is completely fenced. Whilst we did locate herds of oryx and Asiatic wild ass reasonably easily, the significantly smaller sand gazelle was another matter entirely and over four extended game drives, we only managed two distant sightings. In fact, it was again incredibly challenging to find anything beyond these three main

species and although six major predators have been recorded at Shaumari, wolf, golden jackal, red fox, striped hyena, caracal and the African wild cat, we would discover only the ubiquitous red fox. A southern white-breasted hedgehog drinking at a waterhole was another most welcome addition to a rather meagre list of encounters, but that would be it in terms of mammals at Shaumari, where the other principal highlight was a massive and resplendent Eurasian eagle owl. I would actually like to spend far longer here to be fair, as we did not have sufficient time to do such an important reserve justice and Shaumari is almost unique in terms of exposing both international and local visitors to the region's rare endangered species in an authentically wild environment. We were also dividing our time between the nearby Azraq Wetland Reserve and consequently only one of our four game drives occurred at night, which is simply not enough for a major reserve. I had actually expected to spend far longer at Shaumari than Azraq, particularly at night, as Azraq is about half the size of its neighbouring reserve and was almost lost to the world in the early 1990s. Situated in the heart of Jordan's eastern desert towards the border with Saudi Arabia and supplied by a natural spring, the wetland at Azraq was once an



ecological hotspot, a blue and green oasis where hundreds of thousands of migratory birds would stop each year, either to feed and rest or to breed within the wetland. Azraq actually means blue in Arabic and in 1978 this precious environmental jewel was officially protected as the second RSCN reserve. However, Jordan is one of the driest countries on earth, with an average annual rainfall of just 111 millimetres, compared to 1,120 millimetres in the United Kingdom or 2,926 millimetres in Costa Rica. Water is therefore a precious commodity and over the next fifteen years so much water was pumped to large urban areas, or diverted illicitly for local agricultural purposes via hundreds of illegal wells, that by 1993 this aquatic paradise was little more than a useless puddle in the desert with more or less no biological value. The surface area of the wetland had shrunk to just 0.04% of its original size and the water buffalo introduced by Chechen immigrants at the beginning of the 20th century all died. To describe it as an environmental catastrophe would be to somehow overlook the fact that this particular outrage was allowed to occur over several years and at one of the country's most important reserves, certainly in terms of biodiversity and the huge densities attracted to this sparkling blue haven amid a parched sea of sand. The RSCN have been working to alleviate the damage ever since and their efforts have resulted in the Ministry of Water and Irrigation agreeing to supply the reserve with water on a long-term basis, although not nearly enough and only around 10% of the original wetland habitat has been restored to date. Even this relatively minor improvement has resulted in some migratory birds returning after a long absence and in 1998 water buffalo were reintroduced to the reserve in order to assist with the reed bed management. The Azraq killifish is probably the biggest success story here, as this freshwater fish only exists at this solitary oasis and was believed to be extinct as the spring died and the surface water slowly disappeared. The only genuinely endemic vertebrate in the country, the killifish was rediscovered in 2000 and an intensive captive breeding programme has produced a stable and sustainable population of several thousand. Whilst this is obviously encouraging news, the killifish remains critically endangered, as it only occurs at this one point on earth and is entirely dependent on the conservation efforts taking place at Azraq. In some ways it is difficult to know exactly how to react as you explore the reserve, initially on foot via the newly constructed boardwalks and bird hides overlooking the partially restored waterbodies. This section of the reserve must be as beautiful and inviting as it always was, but as you journey beyond the shimmering pools and lush green vegetation, the rest of the area is completely dry and unrecognisable as a



wetland habitat. Part of you acknowledges how much work has been done here and that at least a fraction of the reserve has been saved, but at the same time you know that you are looking at yet another inexcusable ecological calamity that could have so easily been avoided. For all the good that the RSCN have undoubtedly achieved here, there is much more to be done and the water level will need to be increased massively if Azraq is ever going to begin to approach its former glory and fulfil its unique biological niche. To perhaps illustrate the extent of the issue, after several days of searching some of the most arid areas on the planet for a jerboa, a traditional desert specialist, I finally found one at Azraq, the only wetland reserve in Jordan. In addition to our solitary nocturnal jerboa, I was delighted to find a small herd of water buffalo on our first morning walk and on our final morning we did even better, although this time in a vehicle. I thought that we had spotted a jackal at first and was fortunate that whatever the animal was, it was on the left hand side of our car and I was able to take a couple of quick shots out of the passenger window. Startled by us, it ran of course, but equally predictably, it stopped to look back when it thought that it was safe enough to do so, which is when so many animals that are being hunted lose their lives. It is in their instinct to turn back towards any threat and when this particular canid did the same, I could tell that I was looking at a wolf and not a jackal. We were able to enjoy an extended distant view until it disappeared and then followed its fresh tracks on foot directly back to its den, although staying at a respectful distance to ensure that we did not disturb where it lived. For me it was unquestionably the wildlife highlight of the tour and not only because it was so unexpected, but basically because it was a wolf and anyone who knows me, will know how much I love seeing these iconic animals in the wild. They are also never observed here and I talked to one guide who has been visiting Azraq for twenty years without ever encountering a wolf, let alone a wolf when he had his camera in his hand. You know a sighting must be rare when all of the rangers and staff ask to see your pictures, one of which I have reproduced here. It was certainly not a bad way to finish, as this was our last day and would be our last new mammal of the tour, just a little taste of what Jordan has to offer and what we can hope to see on our next adventure here. Both Azraq and Shaumari are situated to the east of the capital Amman, which is desert castle territory and during the hottest part of each day, when we were least likely to encounter a great deal of wildlife, I took the opportunity to visit a few. The 13th century castle Qasr Azraq, where T.E. Lawrence garrisoned his army in 1917, is just six kilometres from Azraq lodge, but the history of these castles predates the Crusades and Qasr Azraq has been the site of a stone fortress since Roman times. Qusayr Amra dates back to the early 8th century and is a UNESCO cultural World Heritage Site, one of only five in the entire country. It is a particularly well preserved example of a palace from the Umayyad period and is famous for its ornate frescos, many of which have survived in remarkable

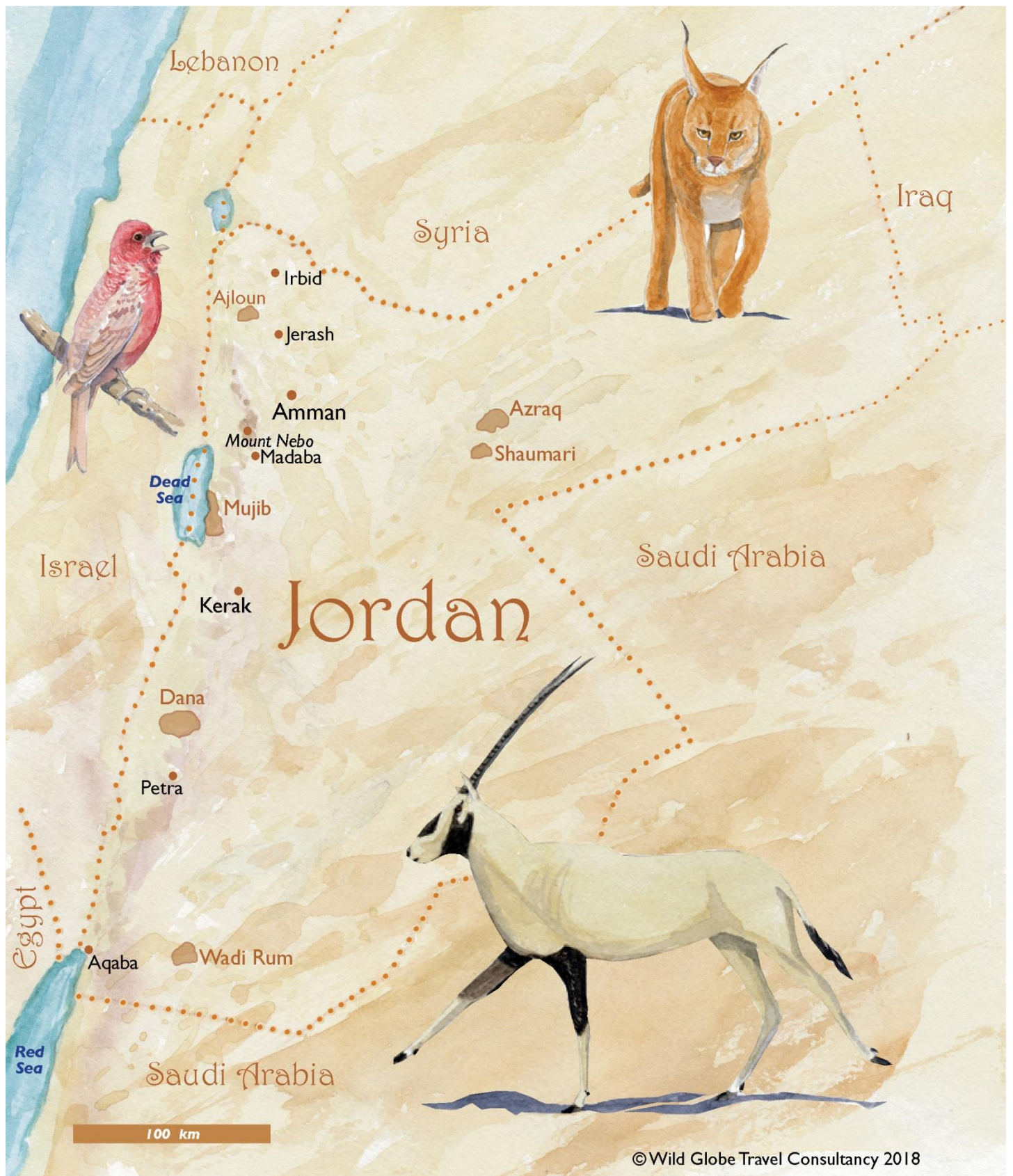
condition. The nearby Qasr Kharana also dates back to the Umayyad Caliphate and has been equally well preserved. It is considered to be an outstanding example of early Islamic architecture in this remote desert region and its impressive symmetry is obviously a feature of many Islamic buildings all over the world. Furthermore, its stark, isolated location would make a superb defensive position, as it rises several metres above the surrounding landscape and would have been exceptionally difficult to conquer, even by a significantly larger force. Detail like this interests me, as does history in general and when I return to this remarkable country in 2020, I hope to devote at least some of my time to visiting one or two of the Crusader castles, certainly the fortifications at Ajloun and Kerak. Although I have never really considered them to be religious conflicts as such, they were more wars of conquest by the European powers on behalf of the all-powerful Catholic Church, the Crusades did have an immense impact on both the region and the people and their profound consequences continue to resonate across the ages. I will hopefully have time to explore the subject further next time, but the vast majority of my return trip will be devoted to wildlife and in particular the remaining RSCN reserves, all of which I intend to visit and support. Meanwhile, if you would like to make a contribution to this pioneering organisation, either by becoming a member or making a financial donation, then please visit the RSCN website (www.rscn.org.jo/how-help), which also includes a great deal of detail regarding their literally critical conservation efforts. The wildlife here deserves our support and so do the people who are working so diligently and with such passion to ensure that it continues to endure in what remains an absorbing and timeless land.



No.	Species	Scientific Name	Notes
1	Grey Wolf	Canis lupus	Lone individual during an early morning drive at Azraq Wetland Reserve.
2	Red Fox	Vulpes vulpes	Individuals at Wadi Rum, Shaumari Wildlife Reserve and Azraq Wetland Reserve.
3	Arabian Oryx	Oryx leucoryx	Observed at Wadi Rum and Shaumari Wildlife Reserve.
4	Arabian Sand Gazelle	Gazella marica	Low numbers at Shaumari Wildlife Reserve.
5	Asiatic Wild Ass	Equus hemionus	Several encounters at Shaumari Wildlife Reserve.
6	Water Buffalo	Bubalus bubalis	Five members of a small wild population living at Azraq Wetland Reserve.
7	Southern White-breasted Hedgehog	Erinaceus concolor	An individual drinking at a waterhole at Shaumari Wildlife Reserve.
8	Desert Hedgehog	Paraechinus aethiopicus	Three within close proximity on a single night at Wadi Rum.
9	Lesser Egyptian Jerboa	Jaculus jaculus	One at night at Azraq Wetland Reserve.







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