

Jabal Thallaja

By Ammar Khammash, The Jordan Times Weekender - July 2003

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An escarpment jutting out of the heavens, hanging like a balcony above Wadi Rum, the mountain range extending from Ras Al Naqab and for some 50 kilometers to the southeast- hides within its dramatic folds secrets from remote and strange times.

Within a few minutes after leaving the Aqaba highway, and past the transmission tower to the east, a pure landscape, not yet scarred by road projects, engulfs you with an air of tranquility and ease. You drive on rugged dirt roads, and every now and then the wheels of the car rub against a bush of wormwood (sheeh?), releasing a trace of intoxicating aroma of the freshest sort.

The main track continues, away from the edge, heading almost in a straight line towards the southeast until Batn Al Ghou, where a small castle hides away in its forgotten valley. From the main track many smaller and more difficult paths take you to different spots on the cliff, each with a unique and different view.

Like driving on a pile of wrinkled carpets, your eye develops the reading skills of a geologist, following the traces of rock layers and learning the way they bend and fold. Driving on this escarpment feels, somehow,

like driving on a gigantic wall, with the landscape sloping smoothly towards Maan to the north, and dropping suddenly towards Wadi Rum and Disi in the south. This landscape is like an edge of a crater, formed by the uplifting of Wadi Rum's rock layers, turning the edges of the Maan desert upwards. There is no better place to learn about the geology of Jordan and explore the land for fossils than here along this dramatic tearing. Here is a cut with continuously eroding surfaces revealing freshly exposed and clear sections of different geological ages.

Passing by in the slow-moving car, the countless stones in all shapes, sizes and colors on both sides can be confusing and somewhat overwhelming. You need to stop and walk every now and then, to be able to inspect an area more closely. After a while your eyes screen and alert you to the unusual objects only.

All of a sudden the car stops, and there is a stone with rings ?by coincidence the sun is hitting it in the right direction at that moment so the rings are accentuated to be spotted from afar. Your eyes are telling you that this is a chunk of wood, but when you lift it, you cry ?a stone. It is amazing how the fossilization process preserves even the finest details.

Looking around this spot, there are many other fragments, some as long as 30cm, some beautifully preserved complete with the rings and knots, and others with the outer texture.

