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Petra: From the Back Door

By Ammar Khammash, The Jordan Times Weekender - August 2002

On the way from Wadi Musa to Baydha, from a point just north of the crusader castle Wu?eira, is the beginning of a journey that will reveal parts of Petra unknown to many. This trek takes you through flavors of Petra away from the beaten tracks and modern interventions ?it is from times of Burckhardt in the early 19th century.

From the Baydha road, at a point where a small valley descends towards the west, you can negotiate a pathway. You should be about 200m north of the crusader castle. The best way to make sure you find the way is to follow the potential flow of water (water flows along most of this track after a heavy rainfall, which makes it dangerous at such times). After about half an hour?s walk downhill, the surrounding landscape turns into a darker red and slowly you will find yourself in a deep riverbed called Wadi Urf Al Deek, with a pleasant, shady natural garden of thick oleander. Following the slope, keep descending till the sides of the track get higher and the path narrower. The sandstone of the path walls continues to darken until it completely deviates from the pastel tones of the oleander blooms.

This is the beginning of a ?secret? entrance to Petra, a second siq that leads to the heart of the city. A walk through this siq is full of suspense. At times the sides get so close that you think you are reaching a dead-end. The sides also perform a wonderful play on sunlight as their upper ends open to let the sun in and close to cut off the sky completely. This passage is infrequently visited; any sound in it echoes strongly and draws the attention of goats that you might see looking down at you from the landscape above. At one point, a dramatic arch spans the siq, at monumental heights, with stones jumping, in a stunning structure, from one side to the other. In careful order these stones form an arch, carrying an aqueduct across the deep siq below. It is a great feeling to pass underneath this marvel of a remaining part of the Nabataean water harvesting techniques.

In many parts, unlike the famous siq, this siq has no loose soil filling its bottom. You will find yourself walking in a V-shaped cavity sometimes as narrow as to allow only one person through at a time, with the width at the base barely enough for the feet, it gives a great feeling of passing through monolithic rock. In a few spots, be prepared to jump over a couple of rock pools (till late spring) but make sure you don?t step into them as their depths and contents are unsafe.

Suddenly a T-junction appears on your left, this is the end of another siq called Wadi Muthlim (some call it Wadi Thalma), meaning the ?dark valley.? If you take this passage you will walk a bit more than one kilometer and find yourself passing through a tunnel and joining the masses of tourists, at the dam of Bab al Siq. Walking in Wadi Muthlim is only advisable if you explore its first 700 or 800 meters, without joining the usual traffic to the Treasury. Better keep walking in the ?secret? siq, prolonging your tranquil adventure in order to see more. The winding passage reaches its climax at a point where it forms an oval space, beautifully decorated with numerous niches carved in the rock. This is one of Jordan?s most impressive locations, a space that nature carved so beautifully and the Nabataeans enhanced so masterfully, reaching a perfect harmony with an impact that will stay in your memory for life.

This siq will eventually let you out in the middle of Petra, at the wide open space past the theater, and close to ?Dorotheos? House? just north-east of ?Mughur al Nasara?.

This secret northern siq provides an experience so special that it makes you feel overpowered and bewildered. It also makes one wonder what else one is missing in this overwhelmingly rich city of the

Nabataeans.

This route is adventurous, but can be dangerous in winter when flash floods occur, so it is not recommended at those times. It is also not suitable for children. Take some water and a lot of film if you like photography. You'll need strong boots and comfortable clothing. It's a tough hike but definitely worth it; for you can see lesser-known parts of Petra through a private sneak. When you finish your visit don?t forget to pay the ?entrance? fees, while exiting.

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