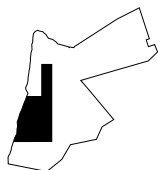


# King's Highway

## الطريق الملوكي



There is a point on the King's Highway, just before you reach the lip of the great Wadi Mujib, where the landscape could best be described as quintessentially Jordanian. Neat olive groves wrap around the contours of the gently undulating hills; sheep, driven in liquid streams of good-natured bleating, pour through the rural network of paths; a village, with washing flapping outside the flat-roofed, ochre-coloured houses, sleeps through the hottest part of the day. Only the lizards disturb the peace as they rustle through the fallen masonry of antiquity, watched by pied wagtails that bob over a mosaic of parched earth.

There is another point on the King's Highway, just after the great yawning gap of Wadi Mujib, where the avenues of poplars, the prickly pear-fences and the sleepy market towns resume. It's as if they form part of a seamless continuum along the surface of the upper plateau, uninterrupted by the great hiatus that divides the northern highway from the south.

There is surely no better metaphor for the continuity and tenacity of human life along this ancient highway. The highway has for the past 3000 years been traversed by the Israelites en route to the Promised Land; by Nabataeans to and from their sacred city at Petra; by Christian faithful on pilgrimage to Moses' memorial at Mt Nebo; by Crusaders to their castle fortifications; and by Muslim pilgrims heading to and from Mecca. Travel the road today, with all its difficulties, and you follow in the path of human beliefs, hopes and dreams.

### HIGHLIGHTS

- Piece together early Christian history in the mosaics of **Madaba** (p184) and visit a modern workshop to see how they were made
- Survey the Promised Land from Moses' memorial at **Mt Nebo** (p193): the promised land that took almost 2000 years to deliver and cost the region dearly
- Dance with Salome's ghost at **Mukawir** (p195), before unveiling the spot where a reluctant Herod beheaded John the Baptist
- Listen to the thunder of ghostly hooves at **Karak castle** (p201) and **Shobak castle** (p211), Jordan's most impressive Crusader castles
- Find peace (and ibex if you're lucky) at **Dana Nature Reserve** (p205), on a hike from the temperate high-ground to the desert landscape of Wadi Araba



## Getting Around

Of Jordan's three highways running north to south, the King's Highway is by far the most interesting, with a host of historical attractions lying on the road or nearby (see p44 for the history of this ancient thoroughfare). The highway connects the mosaic town of Madaba to the pink city of Petra via Crusader castles, Roman forts, biblical sites, a windswept Nabataean temple and some epic landscapes – including the majestic Wadi Mujib.

Unfortunately, Wadi Mujib is to blame for the lack of public transport along this road: minibuses serve the communities on either side of the wadi, while through traffic uses the Desert Highway. Chartering a taxi for the day is more feasible (see p192). The Palace Hotel (and other budget hotels in Amman, see p105) run minibus tours that stop in Wadi Mujib and Karak (and sometimes Dana and Shobak) en route to Petra.

The most convenient way to explore the King's Highway is to hire a car. This allows for longer, circular trips that combine the King's Highway with the Dead Sea Highway along spectacular hairpin roads (see p170).

If all else fails, hitching is possible but be prepared for long waits on deserted stretches – not advisable in the extreme temperatures of summer or winter. To explore all of the sites covered in this chapter on public transport could easily take a week.

## MADABA

☎ 05 / Pop 70,000

The amiable market town of Madaba is best known for a collection of superb, Byzantine-era mosaics. The most famous of these is the mosaic map on the floor of St George's Church, but there are many other mosaics carpeting different parts of the town, many of which are even more complete and vibrant in colour.

One third of Madaba's population is Christian (the other two thirds are Muslim), making it one of the largest Christian communities in Jordan. The town's long tradition of religious tolerance is joyfully – and loudly – expressed on Friday. This is one day when you shouldn't expect a lie-in. The imam summons the faithful before a sliver of dawn leavens the sky. Then the carillon bells bid the Orthodox Christians



to rise, and finally Mammon gets a look in with the honks and groans of traffic. The rest of the day is punctured with yelps to buy apricots, and friendly greetings from children.

Madaba is easily explored on foot. With its lively shops dangling with strings of shoes; skinned goats tended by men in