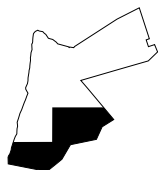


Aqaba, Wadi Rum & the Desert Highway



العقبة وادي رم & الطريق الصحراء

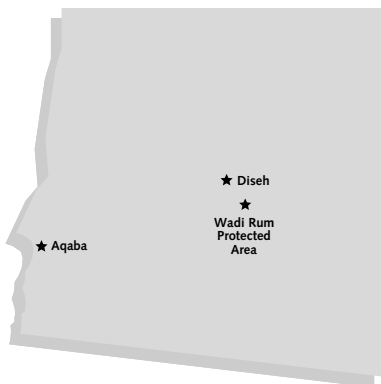
There is a magnificent road (A35) that leads from Wadi Musa, with westerly glimpses across expansive Wadi Araba, to the escarpment of Jebel Batra. Here the road joins the Desert Highway and hand in hand they sweep onto the majestic floor of what is commonly called the Southern Desert. This is the home of the Bedouin, whose legendary courage and bravado were made famous by TE Lawrence in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*; this is where a pan-Arab ideal was most convincingly expressed during the 20th-century Arabic Revolt; it's where the cry of 'to Aqaba' still rings between the towering walls of Wadi Rum, carried in the whistle of the freight train as it winds along the now-placid tracks of the Hejaz Railway.

But put history aside and still the Southern Desert casts a spell on those who visit. This is the quintessential desert of sand dunes, oases and weathered escarpments, beautiful at sunset and awe-inspiringly extreme in midsummer. A trip to Wadi Rum makes all but the most unromantic at heart long to leave the modern world behind and attempt the life of a nomad.

Make no mistake, however: the desert, much of which is characterised not by the picturesque features of Wadi Rum but by inhospitable plains, doesn't take prisoners. Life here is hard, even for the Bedouin and, in the words of Lawrence, 'a death in life' for strangers. Take the journey along the Desert Highway, along the edge of the mighty Badia, and you'll quickly learn a new respect for this extreme environment – and for the people and wildlife who have adapted to its privations.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Live a 'Lawrence moment' by riding through **Wadi Rum** (p260) on a camel, visiting the places made famous in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*
- Enjoy the banter between Bedouin drivers on a **4WD excursion** (p267) through Wadi Rum
- Book a private tent and personally delivered dinner on your own sand dune in **Diseh** (p275) for the ultimate candlelit supper
- Taste fresh tuna steaks in one of the excellent fish restaurants of **Aqaba** (p256), and ruin your love for the tinned version



AQABA

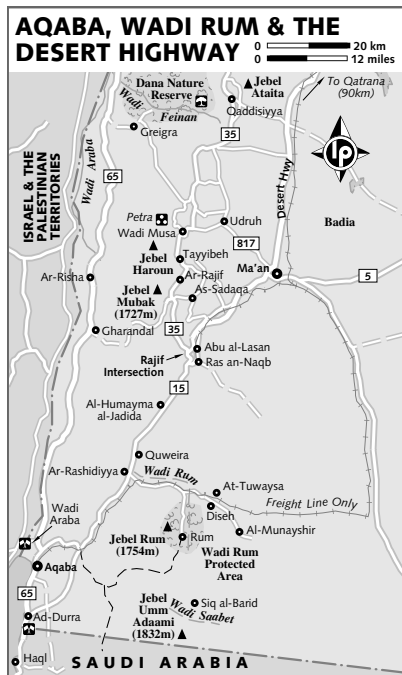
☎ 03 / pop 105,000

Aqaba is the most important city in southern Jordan and, with feverish development underway, is being groomed as the country's second city, if not in size at least in terms of status, revenue and tourism potential. Perched on the edge of the Gulf of Aqaba, ringed by high desert mountains and enjoying a pleasant climate for most of the year, Aqaba has what it takes to make a major resort – a fact not lost on hotel chains: a new InterContinental hotel is up and running and a neighbouring Kempinski hotel was nearly finished at the time of research. In addition, the \$2.5 billion Saraya Project, which includes lagoons, marina, golf course and a British university, was taking shape in the heart of town when we visited and to the south, the Tala Bay hotel and residential development (unopened at the time of writing) will also help Aqaba in its bid to become Jordan's answer to Eilat.

Surprisingly, given this radical makeover, Aqaba retains the relaxed small-town atmosphere of a popular local holiday des-

ertination. For the visitor, although there's not much to 'do' as such, the town offers a sociable stopover en route to the diving and snorkelling clubs to the south, and the big destinations of Wadi Rum and Petra to the northeast. It's also an obvious place to break a journey to/from Israel and the Palestinian Territories or Egypt. There's plenty of good-value accommodation in the town centre and some excellent restaurants. The port mars the view a little and the beaches close to town are fairly unappealing (except at the top-end hotels), but overall you'll probably find you end up staying a day or two longer than you originally planned.

While Amman shivers in winter with temperatures around 5°C and the occasional snowfall, the daytime temperature in Aqaba rarely goes below 20°C and is often quite a few degrees warmer. In summer the weather is hot, with daytime temperatures over 35°C, but the sea breezes make it bearable. It also helps to follow the traditional siesta: everything shuts down around 2pm and reopens after the afternoon nap, from around 6pm.



History

And king Solomon made a navy of ships in Ezion-Geber, which is beside Eloth (Eilat), on the shore of the Red Sea, in the land of Edom

1 Kings 9:26

Excavations at Tell al-Khalifa, 4km west of central Aqaba and right on the border of Jordan and Israel and the Palestinian Territories, have revealed the ancient world's largest copper-smelting site, thought to be the biblical site of Ezion Geber. Smelting was carried out here from the 10th to 5th centuries BC, processing ore from mines in Wadi Araba. Ezion Geber was also the ancient port from which King Solomon's fleet departed for the gold mines of Ophir (an unidentified location, possibly Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea or Yemen).

As trade with southern Arabia and Sheba (present-day Yemen) developed, the area around Aqaba thrived thanks to its position on one of the Middle East's major trade routes, with spurs leading north to Petra, Damascus and Bosra; west to Egypt and Palestine; and south to Arabia. The discovery in Aqaba of ceramics from China and