



Petra بترا

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Why Go?

It's dawn. The path winds down towards the Siq, the dramatic rift in the land that leads towards the hidden city of Petra. The only sounds are the ringing of hooves on cobblestones as horse carts pass into the narrow gorge. The corridor of stone narrows and the cliffs cast long shadows across the sacred way. At length, the path slithers into sunlight and there, bathed in morning glory, stands the Treasury, a beacon of hope to the ancients and a promise of 'wonderful things' for the modern visitor.

If this sublime experience isn't sufficient inducement to visit Petra, then the magnificent spectacle of the 'pink city' tombs at sunset surely will be. Ultimately, however, these dramatic gestures of immortality may prove less memorable than a quiet amble through forgotten tombs, glimpses of outrageously coloured sandstone or a satisfying hike to the top of a High Place.

When to Go

March to May is peak tourist season in Petra and for good reason. Hiking is at its safest, the wadis are seamed with prolific pink-flowering oleander and climbs to the 'high places' are accompanied by spears of flowering aloe.

Mid-October to the end of November, Petra's second high season, offers a last chance to visit in good weather before rains put some routes off-limits.

Bitterly cold by night and bright blue skies by day, Petra is almost empty in winter allowing for a more intimate engagement with the 'Pink City'.

History

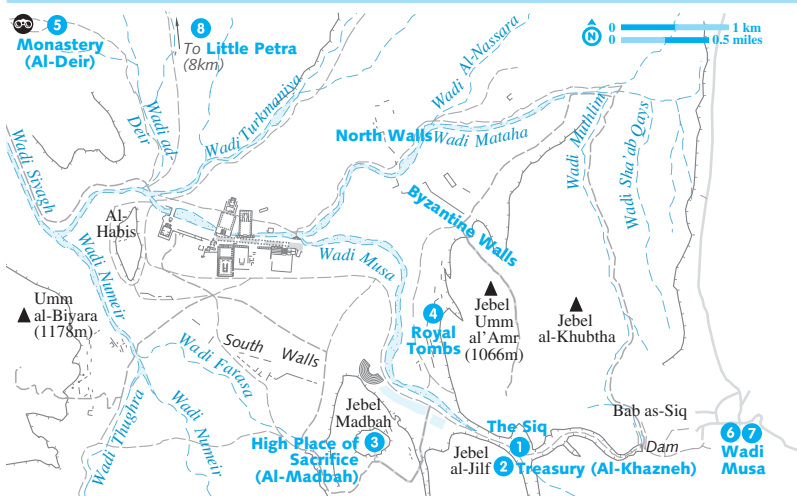
Neolithic villages dating from around 7000 BC can be traced to the surrounding wadis and hillsides of Petra. Remains of the most famous of these, excavated in the 1950s, can be seen at Al-Beidha (p192), just north of Petra. Built at the same time as Jericho on the West Bank, Al-Beidha is one of the earliest known farming communities in the Middle East.

The Nabataeans, a nomadic tribe from western Arabia, settled in the area around the 6th century BC. They were organised traders (see p255) and over the next 500 years they used their wealth to build the city of Petra.

In its heyday, under King Aretas IV (8 BC–AD 40), the city was home to around 30,000 people, including scribes (the Nabataeans

created their own cursive script; the fore-runner of Arabic) and expert hydraulic engineers who built dams, cisterns and water channels to protect the site and its magnificent buildings.

By AD 106, as trade routes shifted from Petra to Palmyra and new sea trade routes via the Red Sea to Rome bypassed Petra altogether, the Romans assumed control of the weakened Nabataean empire. Far from abandoning the city of Petra, however, the invaders recast the ancient city with familiar Roman features, including a colonnaded street and baths. The city was honoured by a visit from Emperor Hadrian in AD 131, and in the 3rd century Petra once again became a capital city – this time of the newly created province of Palaestina Tertia.



Petra Highlights

- 1 Tread the path of history by winding through the **Siq** (p164), the sheer-sided chasm leading to an ancient world
- 2 Catch the early-morning sun slanting off the pillars of the **Treasury** (p166), the sublime spectacle at the end of the Siq
- 3 Climb the processional way to the **High Place of Sacrifice** (p167), pause

for tea with the Bedouin and return to the valley floor through a garden of wildflowers

- 4 Search the **Royal Tombs** (p169) for spirits, lurking in the rainbow-coloured hollows
- 5 Make the pilgrimage to the **Monastery** (p173) and watch the weather-burnished stones catch alight at sunset

- 6 Let your soul glide through the Siq's shadows, guided by music and candlelight on tour with **Petra by Night** (p182)

- 7 Prepare your own traditional Jordanian supper at **Petra Kitchen** (p183)

- 8 Visit **Little Petra** (p191) and enjoy Nabataean tombs and temples in a miniature siq without the company of tour groups