



Aqaba, Wadi Rum & the Desert Highway

العقبة وادي رم & الطريق الصحراء

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Best Places to Stay

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- ➔ Rum Stars Camp (p220)

Best for History

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Why Go?

Southern Jordan is the home of the Bedouin, whose legendary courage and bravado were made famous by TE Lawrence in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. They inhabit the unforgiving Southern Desert, a quintessential landscape 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. And that's possible – at least for a day or two amid the camps of Rum and Diseh, on camel back, by 4WD or floating above in a hot-air balloon.

Nearby Aqaba and the neighbouring diving centres give access to another of Jordan's natural splendours: the coral gardens of the Red Sea. Even if wet suits aren't your thing, Aqaba is a relaxed and pleasant destination in which to wash off the desert dust and plan your onward journey.

When to Go

- ➔ Aqaba enjoys year-round warmth, even in winter, and a crystal clear sea. This brings holidaymakers from the chilly uplands to the shore in large numbers – especially during national holidays and religious festivals.
- ➔ The desert springs to life after rain, making February to May and October to November the perfect time for desert adventure in Wadi Rum. With temperate days and balmy nights, camping is blissful.
- ➔ Despite high temperatures, the all-night music festival Distant Heat attracts party-goers to Wadi Rum in mid-summer.
- ➔ Beware! Mid-winter brings bitter evening temperatures to the desert.

History & Culture

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. For centuries this has been the home of the Bedouin, whose tribes rallied together in the most convincing expression of the pan-Arab ideal during the 20th-century Arabic Revolt. 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.

As romantic as the nomadic life may seem, in the past two or three decades many of the Bedouin tribes have turned to a settled life. The desert, much of which is characterised not by the picturesque features of Wadi Rum but by inhospitable plains, doesn't take prisoners. Life to this day is hard here, 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.

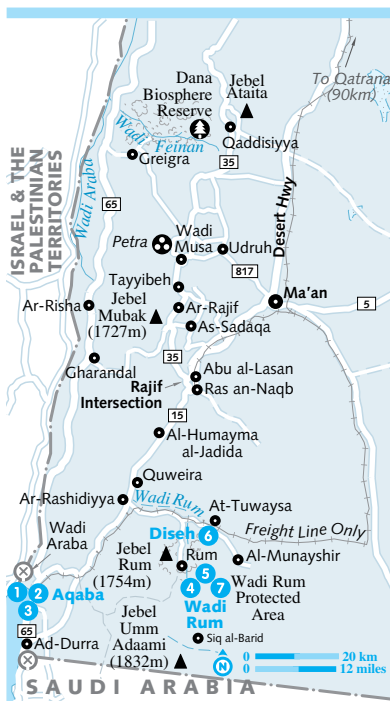
Nature Reserves

There are two reserves in the south of Jordan. On land, the **Wadi Rum Protected Area**, run by the Aqaba authorities, offers desert adventure such as camping, camel treks, hiking, ballooning and off-road driving, amid beautiful sand dunes and sandstone landscapes.

Offshore, the **Red Sea Aqaba Marine Park** (part of the bigger, cross-border Red Sea Marine Peace Park) was established in 1997 to protect the complex marine environment of the Red Sea south of Aqaba. It is best accessed through one of the diving clubs in the area. The park stretches from the Marine Science Station to the Royal Diving Club, and extends about 350m off the coast. Enforced by rangers, there's a ban on fishing and boating is limited within the park. Jetties enable divers and snorkellers to jump into the water rather than wade out over coral from the beach.

Dangers & Annoyances

The Red Sea is home to a number of hazards that with common sense can be avoided. For divers, it's important to remember that most



Aqaba, Wadi Rum & the Desert Highway Highlights

- 1 Don mask and flippers and hover with the pipe fish over spectacular coral gardens in the **Red Sea** (p29).
- 2 Taste fresh tuna steaks in one of the fish restaurants of **Aqaba** (p195), and ruin your love for the tinned version.
- 3 Relax at one of Jordan's southerly **coastal resorts** (p208) and enjoy the three 'S's (sun, sea and sand).
- 4 Live a 'Lawrence moment' by riding through Wadi Rum on a **camel** (p217), visiting the places made famous in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*.
- 5 Enjoy the banter between Bedouin drivers on a **4WD excursion** (p216) through Wadi Rum.
- 6 Book a private tent and personally delivered dinner on your own sand dune in **Diseh** (p224) for the ultimate candlelit supper.
- 7 Camp with the Bedouin in a goat-hair tent in **Wadi Rum** (p220) and experience the night sky in all its glory.