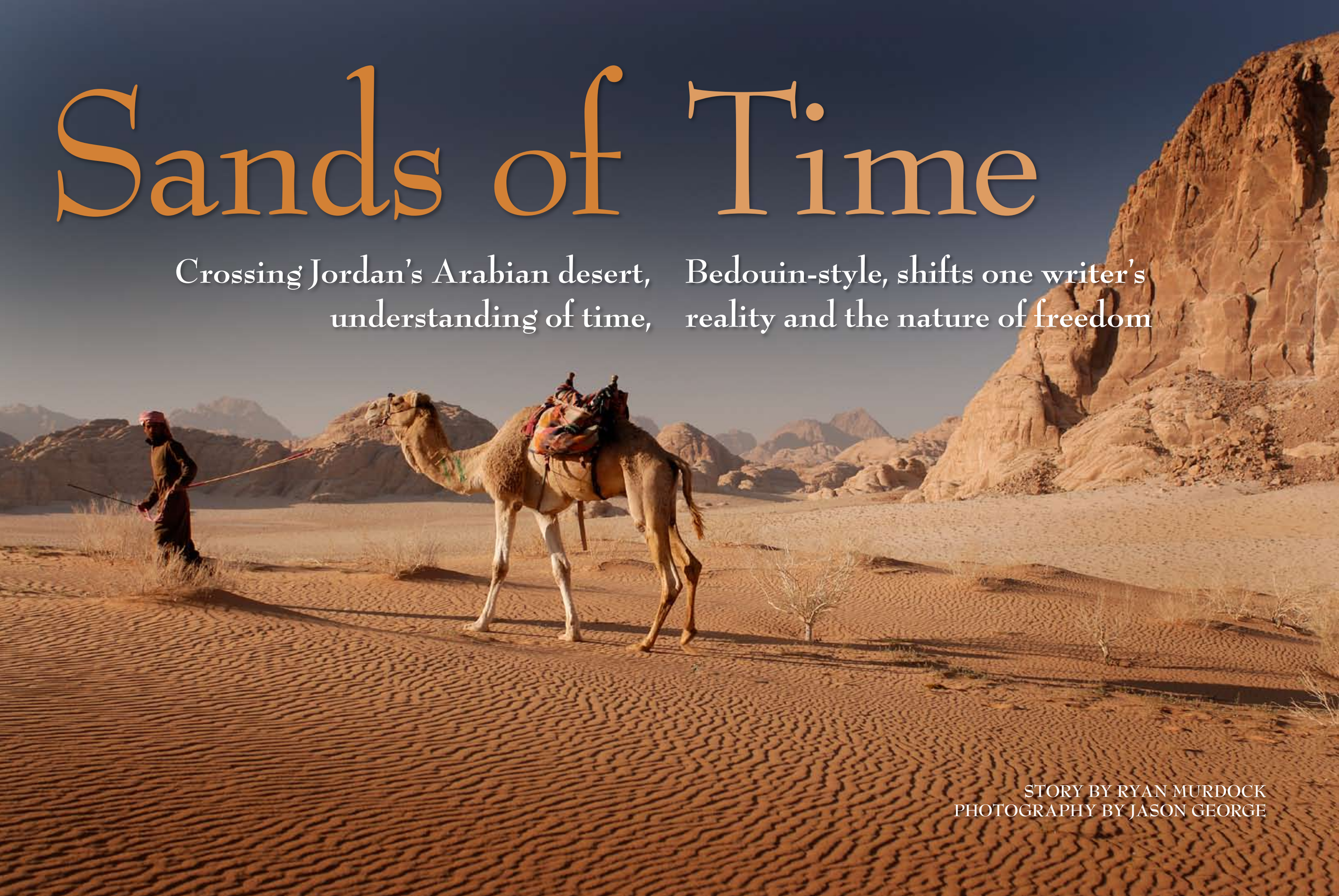


Sands of Time

Crossing Jordan's Arabian desert, understanding of time, Bedouin-style, shifts one writer's reality and the nature of freedom



STORY BY RYAN MURDOCK
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JASON GEORGE



THE SOUTH END OF WADI RUM VILLAGE, THE GATEWAY TO the desert, swarms with activity. Busy jeeps loaded with travellers groan by in military columns. Lines of sweating, red-faced hikers trudge through their powdery wake led by a single Bedouin in a dust-crusted *dishdasha*. They're likely to follow a highlight route to Lawrence's Spring, Khazali Canyon and the Burdah Arch, and night will find them bedded down in established camps with toilets, mattresses and sometimes even a shower. A much smaller group will set out on adrenaline-fuelled climbing excursions up the nearly limitless routes that thread far too many mountains to count. Few will journey to the farther limits of the sandy wastes solely to experience a mode of travel.

Having long ago succumbed to an obsession with deserts, my goal for the trip is to pick up enough camel skills to do a desert crossing entirely on my own. So in an effort to connect with this special region of the earth, photographer Jason George and I set out with Raad Abou M'aitik, a 22-year-old Bedouin of the Howeitat tribe.

The camel is the essential mode of desert transport. The speed of a jeep has a way of compressing perceptions, of distorting the landscape and leaving you with little more than snapshot images, a "highlight reel" of fragmented memories. Hiking is better, but the rigours of a forced march are too often accompanied by the tunnel vision of exhaustion. The camel's pace is the truest means of unlocking the mysteries of the desert. It allows the land to unfurl before you in all the fullness of its glory, and in its own time.

Soon, my burgeoning camel skills would be put to the test.

"Raad, how long will it be until we don't see other travellers?" I ask.

"One day, maybe two. Then nothing," he replies. "Where we're going we probably won't even see Bedouin."

The Bedouin are perhaps the most famous of the world's desert-dwelling nomads. They captured the imagination of 18th-century European Romantics, who created an entire legend around the exotic East of the Arabian Nights, of harems filled with veiled women and of heroic caravan-raiding sheiks. Such tales were embellished by the reports of intrepid travellers like Lady Hester Stanhope and Charles Doughty. The reputation of the Bedouin as "masters of the desert" was solidified by explorers like Sir Richard Francis Burton, Colonel T.E. Lawrence ("Lawrence of Arabia") and Wilfred Thesiger, who travelled among them and experienced the most desperate rigours of desert travel.

Those stories had fuelled my dreams. I wanted to experience in some small way what men like Thesiger saw, to travel as the Bedouin always had and to learn whatever desert skills they still had to offer.

Our travels will take us well beyond the southern limits of the Wadi Rum Protected Area, where we will turn slightly east to venture off of all available maps. It will also be a journey to the roots of Jordanian society.

Jordan is somewhat unique in that it was founded by nomads and comparatively recently. The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan was only established in 1946. Until then it had always been a marginal zone, sectionally coveted by its neighbours but fully occupied by none.

Referred to as Transjordan, the territory was crisscrossed by trade routes that transported the goods of the world. The cultures that surrounded it spilled over its borders and acquired bits and pieces of Transjordan at different times, but the territory was never unified or entirely annexed.

The region saw the waxing and waning of a succession of what I refer to as "linear" civilizations—cultures whose worldview accorded with the straight line of history, of progress from one state to another: Biblical peoples like the Edomites and the Ammonites; the Nabataeans of Petra; the Romans; the Muslim dynasties of the Umayyads and the Abbasids; the Crusaders with their corrupted ideals and castles of stone; and finally the Ottomans.

Throughout all of these long centuries, the nomadic Bedouin continued to exist on the desert fringes. They inhabited a different worldview, one predicated on timelessness, circularity and oral tradition. The First World War changed all that. With the encouragement of the British, who were fighting the Ottoman Turks, the Arab Revolt led by Bedouin chieftains Faisal and Abdullah ended Turkish rule, ushering in a period as a British protectorate, which was followed by independence in 1946. The cyclical worldview of the nomads was brought into sudden contact with the linear worldview of the region's successive histories, melding to produce a culture that is unique in the Middle East.

PREVIOUS PAGE: Morning is the time for walking, when the sand is cool and the light like liquid.

ABOVE: Raad (left) and the author tackle the desert Bedouin-style.

Every Jordanian will tell you that the Bedouin are the foundation of the nation and that the desert is the nation's soul. At the same time, the influence of the successive civilizations that occupied Transjordan continues to exist as a sort of palimpsest upon the land—a land that has been whitewashed and overwritten time and time again, each "overwriting" leaving a discernible trace on the final image.

THE ROLLING GAIT OF THE CAMEL COMBINES WITH THE HEAT to hypnotize me into a stupor. I wrap the *kouffieh* tighter about my head and pull one side down to cover my face. I wear the red and white checked summer tablecloth pattern, the Bedouin head wrap that I saw most often in Jordan. It proves to be an indispensable tool against the cruel desert sun and the blowing sand and dust of the springtime *khamseen* ("50-days wind").

As we ride on in silence I'm struck by the realization that the desert is characterized by an absence of smell. I brush against a tiny sage plant and its potent scent casts the world into sudden colour, reawakening my olfactory antennae and startling me with its vividness. I'd been so attuned to the background that I'd forgotten we were travelling through a monochrome world.

In a similar sense I will discover that my photos of the trip look faked. The whites and greens of my clothing contrast so dramatically with the earth-tone world through which we move that I seem cut and pasted from another image entirely.

It isn't that the desert lacks colour or variety. The rocks are veined with streaks of clay and ebony. They're swathed in



It isn't that the desert lacks colour or variety. The rocks are veined with streaks of clay and ebony. They're swathed in soft pinks, corals, scarlets and oranges—colours that the sun bleaches to a washed-out red and white at noon and that the waning of the day fills with shadows and contrasts

soft pinks, corals, scarlets and oranges—colours that the sun bleaches to a washed-out red and white at noon and that the waning of the day fills with shadows and contrasts. There's ample variety to delight the eye. It's just that the manufactured, vibrant hues of the outside world don't belong there. Neither, truly, do we.

Midway through the first day's ride we pay a visit to the camp of Raad's family. A distant flock of goats is tearing at clumps of green and half a dozen camels stand hobbled beside two faded 1960s Toyota Landcruisers. A new birth graced the herd only five hours before our arrival. The calf struggles on shaky ninepin legs, bleating and stumbling its way into the world as it trips over rusting auto parts and tries to stay close to its mother.

Our party of three is welcomed into the men's side of the tent by Raad's father, uncle and younger brother. We remove our shoes and sit cross-legged on the woven plastic mat that forms a floor space on hard-packed sand.

Bedouin tents (*beit ash-sha'ar*, or "house of hair") are large open-sided structures of woven goat's wool, propped up by sticks and securely roped. The gap beneath the sidewalls can be regulated to control ventilation or to block out wind-whipped sand. They're also easy to collapse and pack when

the pasturage has been exhausted and it's time to move on.

"You want whiskey-Bedouin?" Raad asks with a smile as he pours tiny glassfuls of hot, sweet tea. The protocols of desert hospitality are predictable and comforting. We're made to feel instantly at ease.

After exchanging formalized greetings the men discuss the new birth and also a change in mounts. We had ridden out on two female camels, but Jason's enormous bag of photographic gear has necessitated a switch to a stronger racing camel called Sainan. I'm given a sturdy male breeding camel called Azaran. I like to think that he's needed to carry my notebook, which is compact in size but dense with potential.

I sip my tea and try to ignore the giggles of the younger girls as they peer at us over the cloth partition from the women's side of the tent. The men are pointedly ignoring them; I sense that etiquette demands we do the same.

"Raad, how many brothers and sisters do you have?"

"There are 12 in my family. Six boys and six girls."

"Your father's been busy," I say. The remark is greeted by grins all around and a nod of approval from the old man himself. "Are such large families common?"

"Yes, most Bedouin families are large," says Raad. "But these days young people are waiting two or three years after

marriage to have children and then they are having one or two only, maybe three."

"Does your entire family stay here in the tent?"

"Right now my mother is in the village. We keep a house there. Most Bedouin in Wadi Rum do the same. I like it alright, but the village is crowded and noisy. When I can't sleep, when the noise bothers me too much, I drive out into the desert and unroll my blanket on the sand. There I can always sleep."

"The desert is the true home of the Bedouin," his uncle cuts in. "Our roots are here, our life and our spirit."

Many travellers are surprised and sometimes disillusioned to discover that modern Bedouin life involves jeeps, tourists and a house in the village with modern conveniences like running water, television and Internet. They lament it as a loss of tradition, but in fact it's a continuity.

Contrary to romantic visions of nomads as the ultimate carefree wanderers, Bedouin life was never a black-and-white choice between the settled and the nomadic. It was a blend dictated by circumstance, by convenience, by what was at hand. Like a pair of scales, the emphasis has always shifted between the desert and the sown—and it has always included

ABOVE: Daybreak in the desert.

both. Though the appearance of modern technology gives the impression of great change, it's simply another manifestation of the accoutrements of settled life, just as village houses and planting tools were centuries ago. The Bedouin continue to adapt while existing as they always have—in cyclical time, intimately tied to the timelessness of the desert and to the ebb and flow of oral tradition.

We reach our first camp several hours later. Mbarak, our other Bedouin friend, is waiting with a smoke-blackened teapot simmering over a stick fire. He drives out in his Land Rover each afternoon to a prearranged place where he builds a fire, spreads the woven plastic groundsheet and prepares an end-of-day feast.

I sip hot tea and scribble my notes while Jason treks off to shoot the sunset. When darkness falls Mbarak grills large sections of chicken over the open fire, with whole tomatoes and onions crisped in their skins. We eat it with our hands off pita bread that had been laid directly onto the smoldering ashes to warm, interspersed with dips into the hummus bowl and sips of sweet tea.

I spread my sleeping bag on the barren ground and wrap the kouffieh around my mouth and nose as protection against sand and insects. I love the tranquility of the chill desert night, when my companions are asleep and the camels are still. I lie on my back as the others snore and stare at the dome of the sky, making elaborate wishes whose fruition depends upon spotting the steady slide of a satellite across the star-scattered void. At times like this I feel as though I'm the sole consciousness in that vast and silent space.

The night brings strange dreams. I see the faces of people I hadn't thought about or seen for 20 years. I continue deep conversations with a pretty girl I'd met earlier on the trip. I wake up and for a moment I can't remember where I am; the camp is obscured by the ragged edges of the dreams still inside my head. It's like that every night in the desert. The longer we're



The camel's pace is the truest means of unlocking the mysteries of the desert. It allows the land to unfurl before you in all the fullness of its glory, and in its own time

out there, the more the dividing line between the night world and the day continues to unravel. The land causes mirages of thought as readily as it does visual hallucinations.

THE NEXT MORNING, AFTER A LIGHT BREAKFAST OF PITA bread, sweet halal, cheese and tea, we load the camels and set out. I like to walk for the first two hours of the day, when the sand is still cool and the morning light is like liquid, leading my camel and letting him pause to grab mouthfuls of clover or to rip shoots off a twiggy saltbush plant. We have no agenda short of reaching that night's camp. Our sole purpose is to experience the desert as the Bedouin had, to travel as they did and to soak it all up.

Midday is the time for riding, when the afternoon sun is like a hammer on the anvil of the parched desert floor and we the tinnitus of its blows. As we ride I begin to read the surface of the sand like a book. The comings and goings of red fox crisscross our trail. A flock of sheep leaves close-cropped

LEFT: Lashed by blowing sand as an angry black void swallows the land to the north.

ABOVE: Wax-like formations seem to melt beneath the relentless sun.

grasses and a turmoil of footprints that churn up the darker sand just below the ochre surface. A snake has passed by on its winding way, and the land bears witness to the flight and final convulsions of a tiny mouse that has fallen victim to a hawk. The traces of travellers are evident, too. Their Vibram soles contrast sharply with the simple sandals or bare feet of their Bedouin guides. The desert teems with nocturnal life and each morning tells a new story.

The wind rises in the afternoon and by lunchtime it's whipping up a sandstorm that veils the nearby rock formations in flowing lace. I wrap my kouffieh tighter around my face as the gusts race towards us across the flats. The desert lashes us with sheets of stinging sand and grit, flaying our exposed hands and choking our lungs. We bow our heads and ride on as the storm's solid hand shoves the camels and causes them to stumble. The wind continues to build until the land to the north is completely swallowed by an angry black void. I whip up Azaran and we gallop south through a brown-filtered land, racing ahead of the advancing darkness to make camp beside a tall rock formation cradled by leafy junipers.

Sheltered from the wind, the four of us gather around a large platter of *m'gloubah*—rice, chicken sections, potatoes and

I begin to read the surface of the sand like a book. A snake has passed by on its winding way and the land bears witness to the flight and final convulsions of a mouse that has fallen victim to a hawk. The desert teems with nocturnal life and each morning tells a new story

chunks of red pepper. We pour goat's yogurt over our portion of the communal platter, work the rice into compact balls and then pop them into our mouths with thumb and middle finger. We peel the flesh from the succulent chickens and hurl the bones over our shoulders into the empty night.

"The foxes will eat it when we leave here," Mbarak says, licking rice from his hands.

"It's very satisfying, throwing the bones," I say. "I wish I could do that at home."

"In the desert you are free. You can do what you want. It isn't like that in the village. In the village everyone knows your business."

"Out here I am Bedouin man!" Raad says, standing up tall and echoing Mbarak's sympathies.

The wind dies out as the light fades from the sky, but the dust hangs in the air. I drift to sleep that night beneath a coffee-stain moon, with the camels belching and grunting nearby. Mbarak is right. I feel completely free.

THE COOL OF EARLY SPRING IS A RESTLESS TIME TO TRAVEL.

The camels are in heat and it takes a strong hand to control an amorous male when he catches the scent of a female.

"A few years ago a man was killed near this mountain," Raad says as we began our early morning walk. "His camel see the lady camel, and he want to make sex with her. The man, he don't let him. He make his camel walk the other way. Camel jump on the man from behind, smother and bite him in the neck and head."

"Killed him?"

"Yes, killed. But he was an old man. These camels, they know me. This wouldn't happen to us. I don't worry."

Reassurances aside, I'm encouraged to keep my wits about me when we encounter other camels.

Romance is in the air for Raad as well. From time to time, when he thinks no one is looking, I catch him gazing misty-eyed at the photo of a girl, his fiancée. He'll save the money that he earns by guiding foreigners such as us to fund the presents that will lead up to his wedding.

Bedouin marriages are arranged by the family. In a culture where boys and girls are segregated at a young age, couples seldom have a chance to get to know one another and dating is unheard of. When the son or daughter is ready, the parents seek out a suitable mate. The boy pays visits to the girl's home, accompanied by his mother and sometimes by his sisters. Meetings are always like this; the couple is never alone. The engagement period can last a year or more while the groom saves money and buys his prospective in-laws such presents as clothing, jewellery and electronics.

When the time comes for the official request to marry, the boy's family visits the tent of the girl's family. Cardamom-spiced Bedouin coffee is poured and set in front of the prospective groom, but he doesn't touch it. If the bride's father accepts the union he will invite the groom to drink the coffee, thus sealing the bargain. If he does not accept the union the groom's family will be asked to leave without drinking the coffee. In this way no one is slighted and honour is preserved.

Raad stares at that photograph day after day and in the evenings he climbs rock formations in the vain hope that his cell phone will somehow pull her signal from the ether. He is desperately smitten.

Our camels are smitten too, but only intermittently. On the same day that Raad tells me the story of the man being killed by his camel, Azaran slows his pace to a crawl and looks around with sudden interest. It's the first time that he pays attention to anything more distant than the clover at his feet. I see camels across the *wadi* as he begins to burble from the side of his mouth. Up ahead Sainan does the same—inflating his mouth bladder so that it slops out to hang from the side of his lip like a displaced intestine. He burbles with the sound of a long drawn-out fart, then slurps it back in, somehow managing to look stately and proud in the process.

"You gotta try a new line with the ladies, Sainan," I say. "That can't possibly work."

Azaran sets out toward the other camels with stubborn determination. I yank on the rope, and he pulls back strongly enough to nearly tear it from my hands. I turn him in a complete circle, shouting "Yalla! Yalla!" and whipping his hindquarters with the end of the lead, but it's too thick to be persuasive. He keeps edging away from our caravan, swinging his head and showing me his teeth.

We fight like this until Raad tosses me his camel stick.

"Catch to the camel," he says. I detect a hint of urgency in his voice.

I belt Azaran in the side of the neck, forcing him to turn back, and then whip his hindquarters until he's trotting in our original direction. For the camel, the tape-wrapped stick gives a sting akin to being hit with a ruler. It's unpleasant, but there's no permanent damage. They understand the carrot and the stick, but mostly the stick.

Camels are clever creatures. They're always pushing you, testing to see how much they can get away with. From the start of the trip I had trouble convincing Azaran to couch so that

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Raad prepares lunch-break tea; at the Bedouin tent of Raad's family; Mbarak kicks back in camp; happy camels enjoy a bag of village grain.



We ride through bizarre rock formations that look like cutaway models of an anthill



I could saddle or ride him. Following Raad's example, I pull down on the lead rope, pat him near the top of his front leg and make a vocal command that sounds like clearing one's throat. The camel yanks back firmly and turns to shove me with his shoulder, stepping on my foot in the process. For a moment I lose my balance and he nearly pushes me over. Such behavior doesn't go over well with me. I yank his head sideways with the rope and punch him solidly in the ribs. He grunts, stumbles back a step and sits down, looking as surprised as I've ever seen a camel look.

The next morning I cut a camel stick from a juniper tree and wrap it in electrical tape, as I'd seen Raad do. Within two days I establish that I'm not some timid pushover and Azaran and I get along very well. I'm able to couch him by voice command alone, to saddle and unsaddle him, to climb dunes and get him to gallop. It's my first big step towards mastering the beast.

The next day we ride to our farthest point outside of the Wadi Rum Protected Area, southeast of Burdah to a region that Raad refers to as Wadi Amsaham. From there it's only a short ride to the Saudi border.

Gone are the monolithic peaks and fantastic shapes that dwarf the traveller in Wadi Rum; now we are in a Field of Mars landscape of reddish stony mountains and coarse sandy flats. The small bushes that dot the area are burned up, desiccated and brittle brown. Dried-up watercourses channel only dust.

Riding through such a place is the nearest that most people will come to the feeling of exploring another planet, or a post-apocalyptic wasteland. Your mind drifts in the heat and concocts elaborate hallucinations: it's the aftermath of Judgment Day and we are the souls who have been overlooked, condemned to wander for the rest of eternity and to suffer great thirst. Then the camel stumbles and the illusion is broken.

Lunch is somewhat forlorn. Dead wood exists in plenty and so we have no difficulty brewing tea and warming our bread, but there's no shelter from the cruel sun. Even the usual post-meal flies are absent. Raad and Jason sprawl on the rocks, their faces covered by the kouffieh, and doze in uncomfortable heat. I can't sleep and so I lie on my back listening to a sad Tom Waits song, watching animal shapes drift by in the clouds. Like the images hidden in the convoluted rock formations of the desert, the shapes that you see in clouds are entirely personal. It's a download of the subconscious and mine is presenting me with the enormous gaping mouths of celestial carnivores.

When our nap is finished and the camels have rested, Raad disappears around the corner for his noontime prayers. He returns by a different route, from the mountain above us, clutching green sprigs of sage and thyme.

"For the tea," he says. "It grows high on the mountain. Very expensive in the markets of Amman."

The herbs lend an exotic, almost medicinal flavour to our so-called whiskey-Bedouin. They raise our spirits and put a small dent in the otherworldly gloom of the valley.

We spend the rest of the day riding out of that desolate place. The soft pad of the camel's feet on sand, water sloshing in my saddlebags and the tap of my stick are the only sounds that impose upon the silence. The air clings like wool blankets. My blood turns to red wine; it throbs in my veins and lightens my head.

We ride through bizarre rock formations that look like cutaway models of an anthill or of an antediluvian beast—they're shorn off smooth and the cavities and bubbles of strange inner organs are clearly visible. Other formations are jagged and mountainous and radiate impassive strength. Still others are Dali-esque, as though God had squeezed an enormous hunk of

wax and plunked it down roughly to melt and runnel under the relentless Arabian sun. I expect to stumble across an oracle that speaks in ragged whispers. It's that kind of place.

By day's end a broad loop has taken us back to the more hospitable Wadi Rum region, where Mbarak awaits us at our camp near the southern tip of Burdah Mountain. The evening is silent and pensive. It feels like we've ridden back from the land of the dead.

THE NEXT DAY'S ROUTE TAKES US INTO A ROCKY GORGE where a winding path drops steep to the canyon floor. We have to dismount and lead our camels gingerly down a path of sliding stones with a sheer drop on our right. Camels fear heights and can't be led through such places by force. They simply dig in their heels and snap the rope.

I take hold of Azaran's lead close beneath his chin, place a comforting hand on the back of his strong neck and guide him patiently as he slips and slides on the edge of panic, using kind words of encouragement in place of the stick.

Raad acknowledges my increasing skill with the animals by continuing on ahead, leaving me to deal with the problem at hand. When I reach the canyon floor I find him sitting beside a green bush on which Sainan is munching with evident satisfaction. I sit down beside him and couch Azaran by voice alone, tapping my stick on the ground and uttering the low verbal command. It's the first time Raad looks impressed.

We make camp that night in a steep-sided canyon. We're at the point of highest elevation in the Wadi Rum area and the evening is cold. We huddle near the stick fire, gathering over

ABOVE: The author and Raad ride through a mythic landscape to the final Khazali Mountain camp.

the communal plate, tearing off hunks of pita bread and digging in with our fingers.

If I cover one eye and block out the Land Rover, the scene could very well be taking place 50 or 100 years in the past. We've somehow managed to tap into cyclical time, to enter into that Bedouin worldview. For days I've been amusing myself with the ridiculous idea of taking it to extremes, of going fully native—but in the style of the past. It's the only thing we haven't done yet.

I choke back a grin and propose my idea to the others.

"Listen, Mbarak," I say. "Now that we've been out here for a while and we're getting pretty good with the camels, I want to go raiding."

He looks confused.

"You know, old-school Bedouin style. Cut some telegraph wires. Tear up the tracks of the Hejaz Railway. Maybe raid a camp or two."

He smiles and shakes his head. "And then onward to Aqaba? That doesn't happen anymore, Lawrence."

"What's that, then?"

I point to a water catchment basin that had been built to collect precious runoff from the rock formation across the way. Two narrow gauge rails have been cemented into its base.

"Someone must have bought those," he mumbles, but he doesn't sound entirely convinced.

From Burdah we ride back into the areas of Wadi Rum that are frequented by tourists. As we enter Burrah Canyon our return to civilization is announced by the unfortunate voice of a donkey, whose hee-haws echo off of flutes and columns and reverberate down the *siq*.

The morning is cool and gusts of wind chill my bare feet to the bone. I tuck them in close against the camel's dusty fur



The Bedouin continue to adapt while existing as they always have—in cyclical time, intimately tied to the timelessness of the desert and to the ebb and flow of oral tradition

and wrap the kouffieh tighter around my neck. Up ahead Raad does the same.

We ride past a herd of goats and climb to the base of an enormous red dune that towers over the surrounding desert. We hobble the camels at the bottom and force our way up the dune on sand that's as fine as powdered bone, thighs burning and lungs dredging up long-forgotten sludge. At the top I walk off to a distant slope while Jason photographs Raad in all his Bedouin glory.

The desert is the ideal place to be alone, to sit and think. It's simple and clean, and the landscape matches the silence. The people who live in it are rugged and resourceful survivors. Life is shorn of superfluities, boiled down to the things you need and nothing else. The emptiness of the land and the colossal

ABOVE: Raad, Mbarak, the author and photographer enjoy the companionship of a twig fire.

hunks of rock dwarf you; they put things back into perspective. In a place like this the outside world has no bearing. There's no Internet or mortgages, no office politics or freeway commute, no furniture stores or tiresome bar scene. There's only life and the absence of it, and one flows into the other.

There's only one thing to do in such a place. I climb something high and gaze off into the distance. I stare at my handprint in the side of a dune and I see the entire world and my life in it in a grain of sand. 🌍

RYAN MURDOCK is an associate editor of *Outpost*, and an RMAX Faculty Head Coach. See www.rmaxstaff.com/murdock for info.

JASON GEORGE is a Toronto-based photographer who has been working on various magazine assignments, and a variety of commercial and editorial projects while in and around his hometown. See www.jasongeorge.com for more info.

OUTPOSTINGS JORDAN



Full name: Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan (originally Transjordan)

Location: Middle East, bordering Israel, Syria, Iraq and Saudi Arabia

Capital: Amman

Area: 92,300 sq. km

Population: 6,053,193

Language: Arabic, English understood among some individuals

Ethnicity: Arab

Religions: Sunni Muslim, 92%; Christian, 6%; Shi'a Muslim and Druze, 2%

Currency: Jordanian dinar (JOD)

Time Zone: GMT/UTC +2 (DST: UTC +3)

Natural hazards: Droughts, periodic earthquakes

Climate: Most of Jordan is arid desert that is hot and dry for the majority of the year. In the west, November to April is the rainy season, when temperatures are cooler.

WHEN TO GO

If you're not a fan of hot, dry weather, avoid Jordan in the summer when temperatures can exceed 36 C. Also, the roads can become congested in Amman in the summer when local tourism is at its peak. Keep in mind that temperatures drop from late fall to early spring (averaging 13 C); frost and even snow are not uncommon

during December and January.

However, the seasonal contrasts between summer and winter are more drastic the farther inland you go, so it's fairly pleasant in the western region near the Dead Sea and Amman year round.

GETTING AROUND

The best way to get around western Jordan is by renting a car. The roads are well maintained and you can travel with relative ease. You can also take a bus or use the readily available taxis; have small bills handy and arrange a price at the beginning of the trip.

There are three major highways: the north-south Desert Highway that enters through the Syria-Jordan border is the quickest way to travel from point A to B; the north-south King's Highway follows almost the same route from Amman to Petra and is considered the slower, more scenic route; and the Dead Sea Highway from Amman to Aqaba that takes you by the Dead Sea.

The eastern region, due to being more inland, is much hotter and drier and there are

fewer roads and accessible tourist sites. Take a jeep to explore the desert, or get a guide and hike or go by camel.

GETTING THERE

The Queen Alia International Airport in Amman is the only international airport in Jordan. The only direct flight from Canada is from Montreal to Amman with Royal Jordanian Airlines. There are also one-stop flights through one of several U.S. or European cities.

WHAT TO SEE AND DO

To venture into Jordan's desert regions, Petra Moon Tourism (www.petramoon.com) is a local company that offers guided tours via jeep, camel, horse or by foot. For the Wadi Rum camel trek, Petra Moon works with a local Bedouin to create an authentic desert experience.

Jordan offers more than a few ancient historical sites to explore. Petra, in the southern region of Ma'an, is an entire city carved out of the mountains on the eastern edge of the Wadi Araba desert. Famous for the remarkable stone structures embedded in rust-coloured sandstone, it has been nominated as one of the New Seven Wonders of the World (the finalists will be announced July 7, 2007).

Along the western border is the Dead Sea—the lowest point on Earth at over 400 metres below sea level. The water has an extremely high content of salt and other minerals, so much so that anyone can float almost effortlessly in its waters. The Dead Sea also has a rich history—cities of antiquity mentioned in the Book of Genesis, including Sodom and Gomorra, are thought to once have been located on its shores.

Be sure to contact the Jordan Tourism Board North America (seejordan.org), an organization that works to connect travellers with all there is to see and do in Jordan. Their site includes links to hotels and festivals.



ABOVE: Morning silence in rock-hewn Petra.

PHOTO: JASON GEORGE; MAP: STEVE WILSON