



**'What's the speed limit?'**

I ask. 'Not what it says on the signs' my guide, Omar, reassures me with a wry smile as we tear out of Amman on the

King's Highway, at the start of an adventure across Jordan. I'm in good hands. Omar, who looks after Lord Montagu when he's in town for the Jewel of Jordan rally, is a notorious man-about-town.

Temperatures are in the late 30's and mini-twisters conspiratorially stir up the sands that stretch as far as the eye can see, but in the cooler climes of one of Jordan's highest peaks perches the Rummana campsite. Luxurious tepees are spread out around a communal goat's-hair tent and the main house has immaculate hot-water showers and a reassuringly large kitchen. Here, pistachio and juniper trees perfume the air and jekylls whoop and giggle like nearby schoolchildren, but aside from this noise, and the scratch-marks of porcupines digging for sea onions, there are few signs of life in this unforgiving territory. Saleh, the camp's manager, has lived here all his life as did his father and grandfather before him, and gazing across his beloved valley,

he explains what keeps him here: 'Nature,' he says simply. 'When you feel it, it feels you. If you stare across the valley, you can read the mountains from one side to the other - like a book. It might take an hour, or a day, or a week, but when you find the title of the story, you will be happy.'

Just an hour away, lies Jordan's biggest tourist attraction: the ancient city of Petra. Access is via a narrow kilometre-long passage carved out of red sandstone. When you get your first glimpse of the Treasury building, it's easy to see why Spielberg chose this monument for the hiding place of the Holy Grail in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*. It's wondrous.

The rest of the area is a maze of higgledy-piggledy caves and mausoleums exuding mystery and drama, and the suggestion of something that goes beyond engineering and architecture.

If your lungs are up to it, climb the 800 steps to the high

monastery, Ad-Deir. From here, the views inspire the days Before Christ, when wealthy Nabataeans charged up and down the marble streets, laden with frankincense, myrrh, Indian spices and animal hides. Today, many questions still remain unanswered, and these are as much a part of the romance of Petra, as the mark that Indy's whip has left on it.

'Vast, echoing and God-like' is how Lawrence of Arabia described the desert that surrounds Petra. Rock faces tower over the barren wilderness, backlit, like the silhouettes of Roman gods surveying their divine territory. But my young host, Abdullah, has seen it all before. He's taking me for a tour in his 4x4 - Arabian music blaring - and pulls to a halt at the base of 200-foot sand dune. He sits and smokes while I take on the mighty dune. Two steps forward, five steps back; sinking and sweating until I reach the summit

breathless, and hurl myself down taking giant leaps. What a high.

My shelter for the night is Mzied Atieg, a Bedouin camp, and as it happens, the place Harrow School sends its boys for a week each year to learn about plate tectonics. Abdullah doesn't join me for dinner because he's welcoming his cousin back after four years in exile for accidentally shooting someone dead in the desert. Just another day in the Wadi Rum.

All the while, the Dead Sea beckons. Just 45 minutes south of Amman, it sits at the lowest point on earth and operates within its own microclimate. Ergo: oxygen-rich air, mineral-laden sea water and UV-filtered rays. Here, sun-worshippers are

**COUNTY KILKENNY**

The centuries-old Irish love affair with horses has reached a new peak with the opening of a world-class equestrian centre at the Mount Juliet Conrad hotel in Thomastown, County Kilkenny. Unveiled just weeks ago, the £3m centre has horses, ponies, stables, barns, an Olympic-sized dressage arena and, best of all, 18 miles of professionally laid-out bridle ways through the heart of the stunning Georgian estate.

Already firmly established as a luxury resort for golf, fishing, walking and shooting, this state-of-the-art centre now adds riding to the menu, giving guests the chance to spend the entire day in the saddle, whatever their level of expertise.

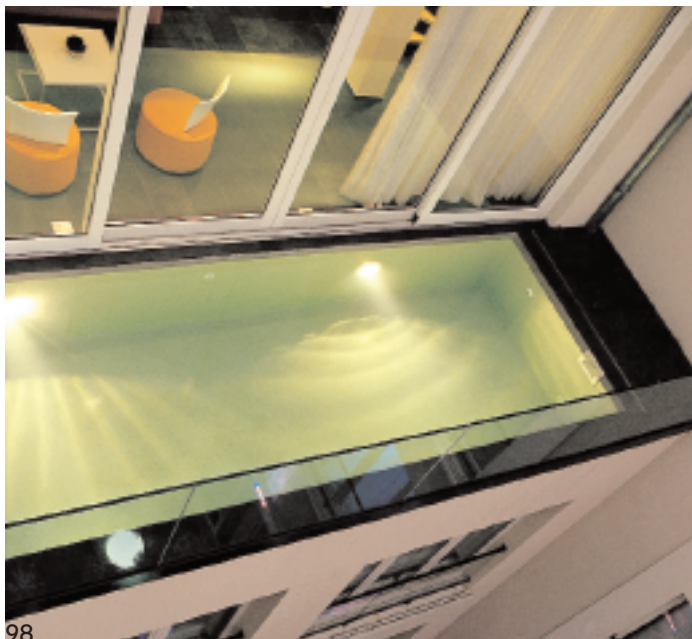


For those less keen on waking up a tad sore, the 1,700-acre estate is still worth a visit, if only to see the stud farm on the far side of River Nore and, closer to the stables and hotel, the extraordinary pack of Irish Foxhounds in their ancient kennels. Whatever one's view on hunting may be - devotees will know that the recent ban does not yet extend across the Irish Sea - it is impossible not to be impressed by these superb animals, while fearing for any fox that may come within a country mile of them.

The Irish have always been good at doing the big, old country house hotel thing, complete with championship golf courses and lakes stuffed with salmon and trout. In adding horse riding by the river into the mix, the Mount Juliet Conrad has just succeeded in raising the bar. [mountjuliet.ie](http://mountjuliet.ie)

promised the 'best tan in the world - even for English people', according to Ashraf Abulhuda, marketing manager at the Kempinski Hotel Ishtar. And the Ishtar is making the most of its natural gifts by unveiling the biggest spa in the Middle East this October. So, while the woman in your life is being slathered with mud, courtesy of Anantara's delightful staff, you can head for the Mujib valley for rock-sliding, abseiling and canyoning, before taking a buoyant dip in the sea.

Bobbing around in Earth's giant teardrop, you are forced to slow down and appreciate Jordan's charms. But if you are planning a visit to the Dead Sea, do it now, because it's shrinking by a metre a year. Maybe that's why everyone drives so fast here. [visitjordan.com](http://visitjordan.com)



**MURANO, PARIS**

On the edge of the achingly hip Marais district, this minimalist-with-a-twist hotel offers more than a highly fashionable, convenient location and luxurious rooms. It is the only hotel in Paris offering suites with private pools installed on the balcony, and your room comes furnished with the keys to an open-top white Audi TT Cabriolet - a zippy little model that makes cruising the Champs Elysées all the more entertaining. Just make sure that you leave a gap between jumping into the driver's seat and consuming the champagne and strawberries served on arrival. [muranoresort.com](http://muranoresort.com)