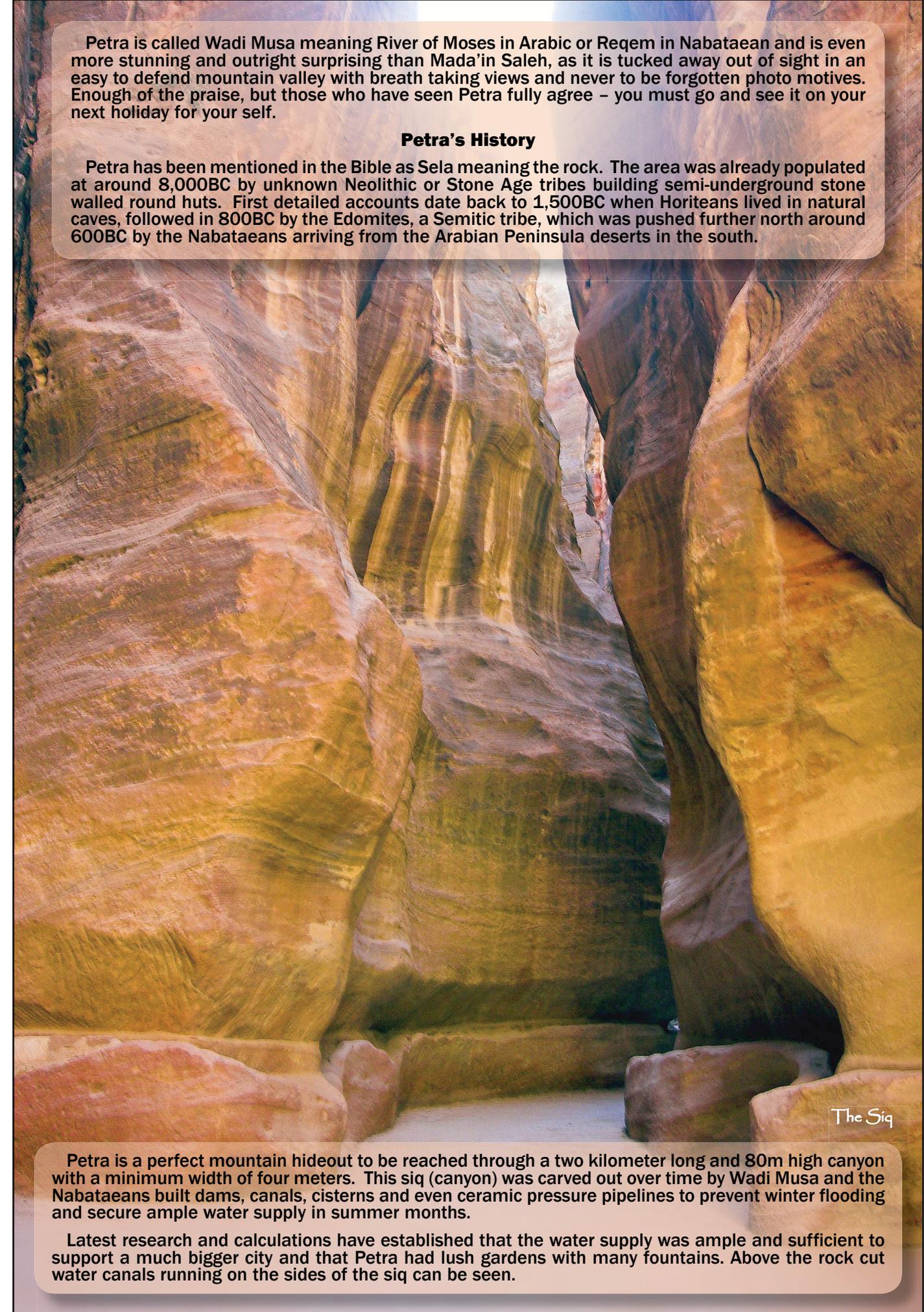


The Nabataean Culture & Its Petra Capital

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In a new series of articles we are now focussing on the Nabataean Culture. The first article introduced us to the Nabataeans and Mada'in Saleh. Now we are looking at the most interesting Nabataean capital of Petra, a UNESCO world heritage site in southern Jordan.

The Treasury
Viewed from the Siq



Petra is called Wadi Musa meaning River of Moses in Arabic or Raqem in Nabataean and is even more stunning and outright surprising than Mada'in Saleh, as it is tucked away out of sight in an easy to defend mountain valley with breath taking views and never to be forgotten photo motives. Enough of the praise, but those who have seen Petra fully agree – you must go and see it on your next holiday for your self.

Petra's History

Petra has been mentioned in the Bible as Sela meaning the rock. The area was already populated at around 8,000BC by unknown Neolithic or Stone Age tribes building semi-underground stone walled round huts. First detailed accounts date back to 1,500BC when Horiteans lived in natural caves, followed in 800BC by the Edomites, a Semitic tribe, which was pushed further north around 600BC by the Nabataeans arriving from the Arabian Peninsula deserts in the south.

The Siq

Petra is a perfect mountain hideout to be reached through a two kilometer long and 80m high canyon with a minimum width of four meters. This siq (canyon) was carved out over time by Wadi Musa and the Nabataeans built dams, canals, cisterns and even ceramic pressure pipelines to prevent winter flooding and secure ample water supply in summer months.

Latest research and calculations have established that the water supply was ample and sufficient to support a much bigger city and that Petra had lush gardens with many fountains. Above the rock cut water canals running on the sides of the siq can be seen.

Due to its extraordinary situation and historic importance the Nabataean capital of Petra had a very illustrious history. After 106AD Romans took full reign in Petra and converted it into a Roman city extending the existing amphitheatre to 8,500 seating, constructing a tall triumph gate and a 500m long and 6m wide main boulevard with a columned shopping arcade on both sides, a nymphaeum, a thermal bath, various temples and markets.

Emperor Trajan built a road from Damascus via Petra to the Red Sea and in 129AD its name was changed to Hadriane. In 200AD Elagabalus raised Petra's status to that of a Roman colony and in 293AD Diocletian made Petra capital of the new Roman province Palaestina Tertia. About 500AD during Byzantine times various tombs in Petra were converted into churches, such as the Urn Tomb, the Monastery and one tomb in Little Petra as well. In 636AD Arab tribes again conquered Petra and over time inhabitants abandoned Petra. Two earthquakes on 19 May 363AD and again in 551AD caused major damage to the tombs, which still can be seen today.

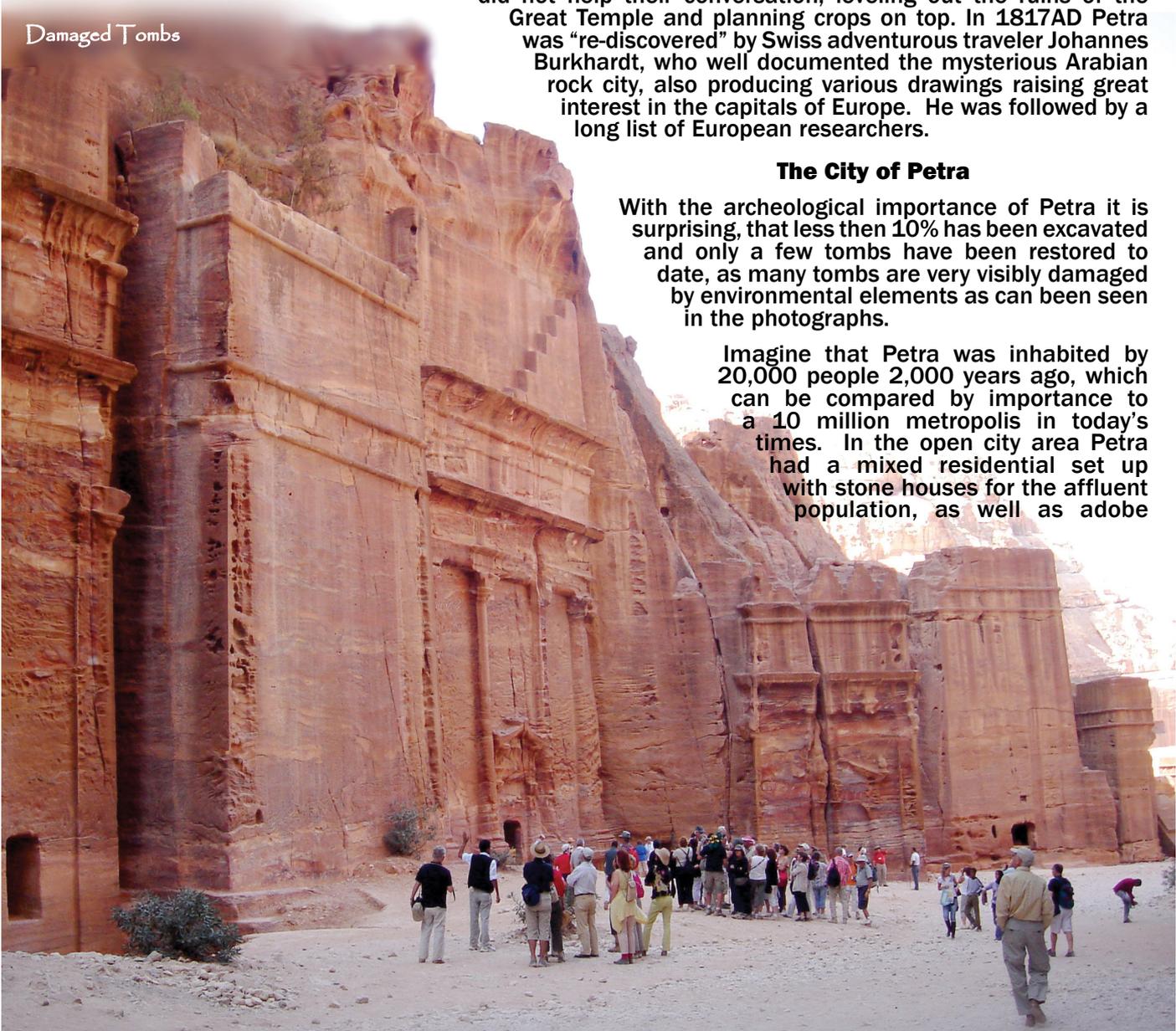
European crusaders the Franconians from Germany moved into Petra for a short period around 1100AD and built a fortress on Jebel el Habis. Thereafter, only a few Bedouins living in the cleaned out tombs, which did not help their conversation, leveling out the ruins of the Great Temple and planting crops on top. In 1817AD Petra was "re-discovered" by Swiss adventurous traveler Johannes Burkhart, who well documented the mysterious Arabian rock city, also producing various drawings raising great interest in the capitals of Europe. He was followed by a long list of European researchers.

Damaged Tombs

The City of Petra

With the archeological importance of Petra it is surprising, that less than 10% has been excavated and only a few tombs have been restored to date, as many tombs are very visibly damaged by environmental elements as can be seen in the photographs.

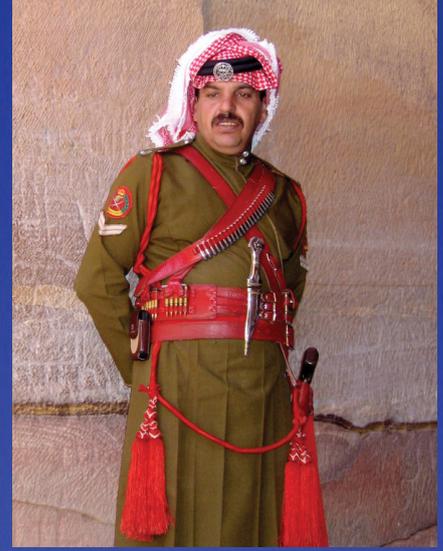
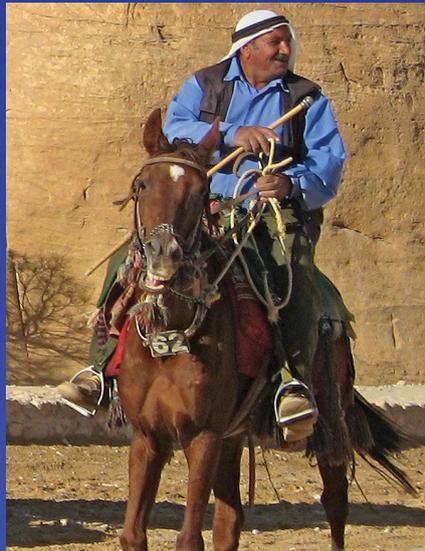
Imagine that Petra was inhabited by 20,000 people 2,000 years ago, which can be compared by importance to a 10 million metropolis in today's times. In the open city area Petra had a mixed residential set up with stone houses for the affluent population, as well as adobe



housing for the lower class and tents for incoming caravans.

Petra's wealthy inhabitants lived in luxury in double story buildings with running water, courtyards with gardens and fountains. Reception rooms were richly decorated in Hellenistic and Roman style, whereby bedrooms were more simple and Arabic.

For the enormous building activity a lot of building material was needed and this was sourced from old quarries found nearby in Wadi Syrah. Through the mountain ranges in the east and west Petra was ideally protected, but there was a possibility of attack from the north and south, therefore two fortified city walls were built on either side. Later during Byzantine times a second shorter wall was built closer to the city center, as population numbers had reduced to less than half.



Petra and its Tombs

The variety of trading goods, such as: frankincense, myrrh, spices, perfumes from Arabia Felix (Yemen) and silk and gem stones from China coming in via Iran and Mesopotamia on the famous Silk Road were warehoused at Siq el-Barid ten kilometers northeast of Petra. This site is also called Little Petra, as it is similarly placed in a secret canyon, but is only 10% of the size of Petra. Fortunately it has very few visitors compared to the 5,000 daily tourists streaming into Petra.

If not pointed out, visitors normally do not see the intensive hydrological works performed at Petra. Neatly hidden, one of the pipelines runs through the upper part of tomb facades and also right through the middle of tomb chambers not to disturb the natural flow of water. This demonstrates the importance of water management at Petra versus the respect for the dead. In total three ceramic pipelines supply Petra with valuable water via Bab el-Siq, Wadi el-Metaha, plus the north south connection with various dams. Intensive farming was also done around Petra in the Wadis and on high lying fields to supply the many Petra inhabitants with food.

Over 250 important tombs can be visited in Petra, plus 50 places of worship with temples, altars, shrines, steles, votive niches and places of sacrifice.

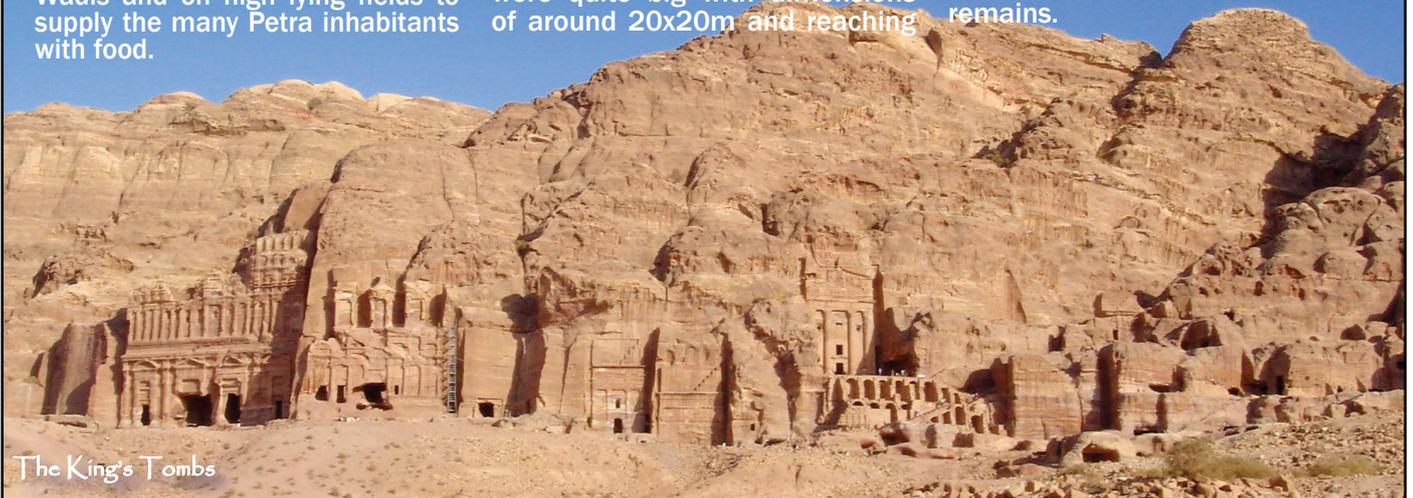
First smaller single person tombs were carved in rock facades and the first monumental or king tombs were only created around 100BC. In Petra tombs can be classified in three groups: a tower facade with one or two row of merlons across, or with a pair of five stairs rising from the center to either side, plus monumental tombs with very complex and artistically crafted Hellenistic and Roman style facades. Merlon tombs were made for lower class burials and there are 156 tombs in Petra with one row of merlons and 81 tombs with two rows of merlons, again a slight distinction in social standing and those tombs were rather small and confined to certain areas.

Many tombs are very similar in style and inside burial chambers can be divided into two styles: vertical shaft and corridor with niches. Some burial chambers were quite big with dimensions of around 20x20m and reaching

a heights of up to 8m. This is why some of the tombs were later converted to churches.

There is another earlier type of tomb with only three examples found right after the entrance of the Petra site. The block tombs are huge monolithic carved square stone blocks around eight meters high and have no burial chamber at all. Therefore they were at first called Ghost Tombs and were not believed to be tombs. But one of the tombs have a cut out grave like cavity on top and at Suweida a block tomb was found to have a top burial chamber previously covered by a small pyramid.

This might rightfully suggest some Egyptian influence, as Nabataeans provided balm and bitumen from the Dead Sea to Egypt, which were the necessary raw materials for embalming their mummies and building their important fleet of ships. Suweida is one of the many other Nabataean towns in the area, in which at least twenty cities and towns were found with Nabataean remains.



The King's Tombs

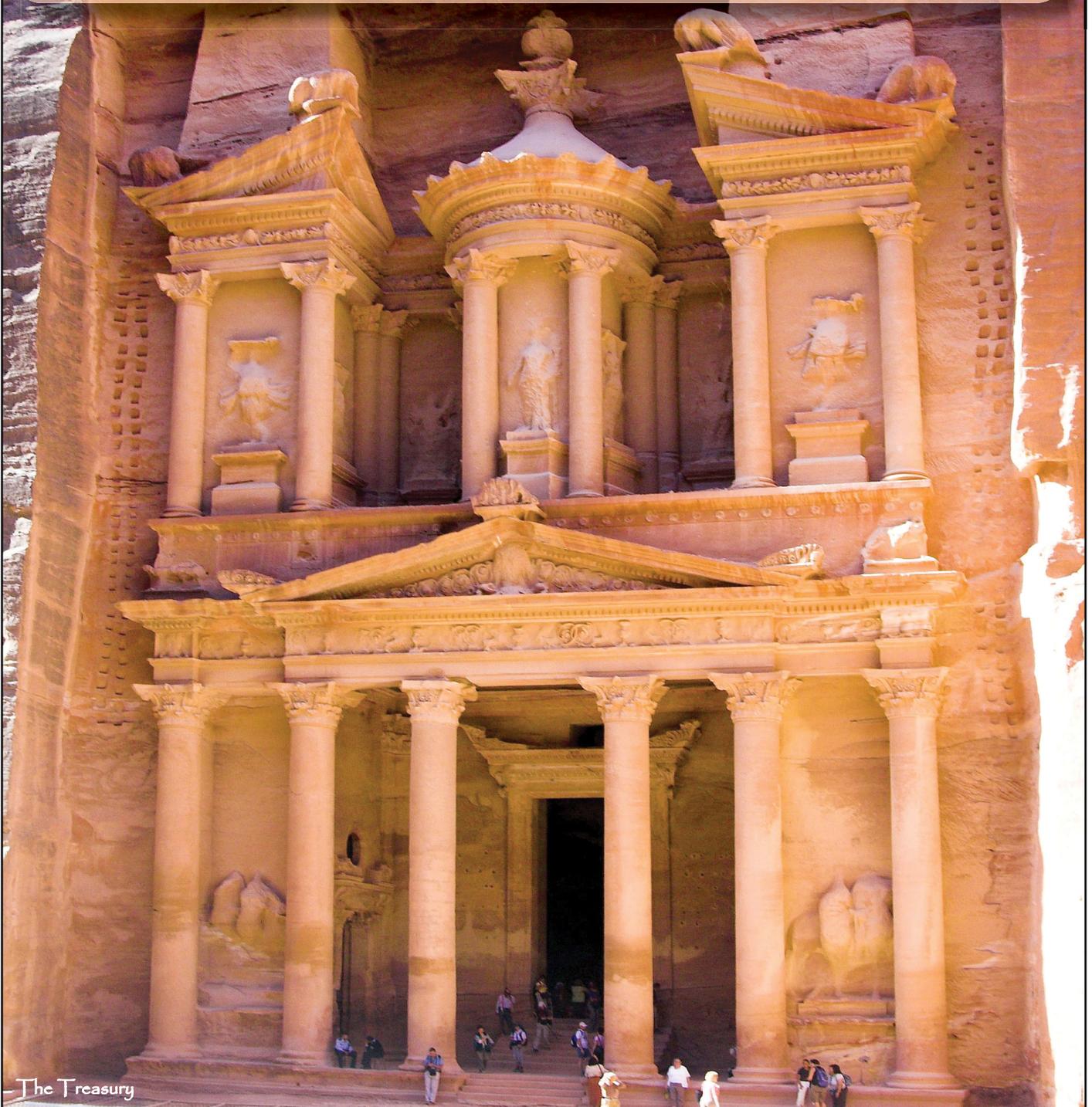
Visitors are awestruck by the impressive Greek temple like tomb facades and absolutely surprised to hear that some or even many tomb chamber walls were covered with plaster and colorful painted ornaments and text. This might be the reason that in Mada'in Saleh many tombs have inscriptions over the entrance, which are not found in Petra. One theory maintains that outside tomb facades might have been plastered and painted as well, as they have lots of plain empty spaces, but this has not been proven yet.

Petra is also distinguished by the many tricliniums, Latin for room with stone benches on three side walls, which played a very important role in Nabataean rituals and were used for regular ritual banquets. These were found next to important graves and used for regular ceremonial meals, because of their size and similar architecture they were mistaken at first for tombs.

The Treasury

There is much written about Petra and its major tombs, but I will only give you some rather limited insight on five of the most important structures.

The first you will see when leaving the long entrance canyon is the famous so called Treasury or Khazneh el-Fa'roun, 40m high (comparable to a building with 13 floors) and 25m wide. It is carved into a blackish sandstone rock face, which color results from the high iron content and is situated in a 70m wide and 250m long dead end side canyon. The impressive temple like facade is richly decorated with Greek sculptures, reliefs of amazons, eagles, horses and lions among others.



The Treasury

Until today it is unclear if the Treasury, which could not be precisely dated yet, was a temple or tomb. If it was a tomb, it might have been that of King Aretas III who reigned from 87-62BC, or that of Obodas II. who was King only for a short period from 62-60BC.

The interesting part is that recently some underground burial chambers with tomb like entrance facade were found right in front of it with corridors leading underneath the building. The Treasury received its name from old Bedouin belief, that the Pharaoh hid a gold treasure in the eight meter high urn on top. This is why with no avail the local Bedouins tried in the past to break the myth and therefore the urn carries various bullet marks still today.

The King Tombs Row

This impressive rock front with four important and complex built massive tombs at the base of the el-Hubta mountain range overlooks the sprawling valley with the old city center of Petra. To the row of King Tombs we count the famous Urn Tomb with various busts possibly depicting King Malichus II (9BC to 40AD), or King Aretas IV (40-70AD). Byzantine bishop Jason converted this tomb into a church in 446/447AD and built a forecourt and new stairs climbing up over two floors of brick built arcades.

The Silk Tomb is highly damaged by environmental influences with the entire facade surface gone exposing the underlying multicolored sandstone giving this tomb its name. The Corinthian Tomb is similar in design to the

Treasury and Monastery and again damaged by the elements. It is assumed to be the tomb of King Malichus II.

The Palace Tomb has a highly structured and the widest facade of all tombs with sixteen columns. The upper part of it's facade is very differently styled and built up with stone bricks, which is also unique in Petra. It has four entrances and four different chambers and is assumed to be the tomb of the last independently ruling King Rabbel II also called Rabbel Soter (70-106AD).

The Great Temple

A field of little recognized ruins on the hilly south side of the colonnaded main street is the site of Petra's Great Temple, which was first believed to be Roman, but when excavated over 14 years starting in 1993, soon it became evident that this 7,500sqm building was a main center of Nabataean culture.

Built during the last quarter of the 1st century BC during the reign of Obodas III. and Aretas IV (30BC to 40AD) it demonstrates best the sophisticated Nabataean architecture, with 15m high delicately sculptured columns with elephant headed capitals, frescos and stucco walls in two combined temple like buildings on different level platforms.

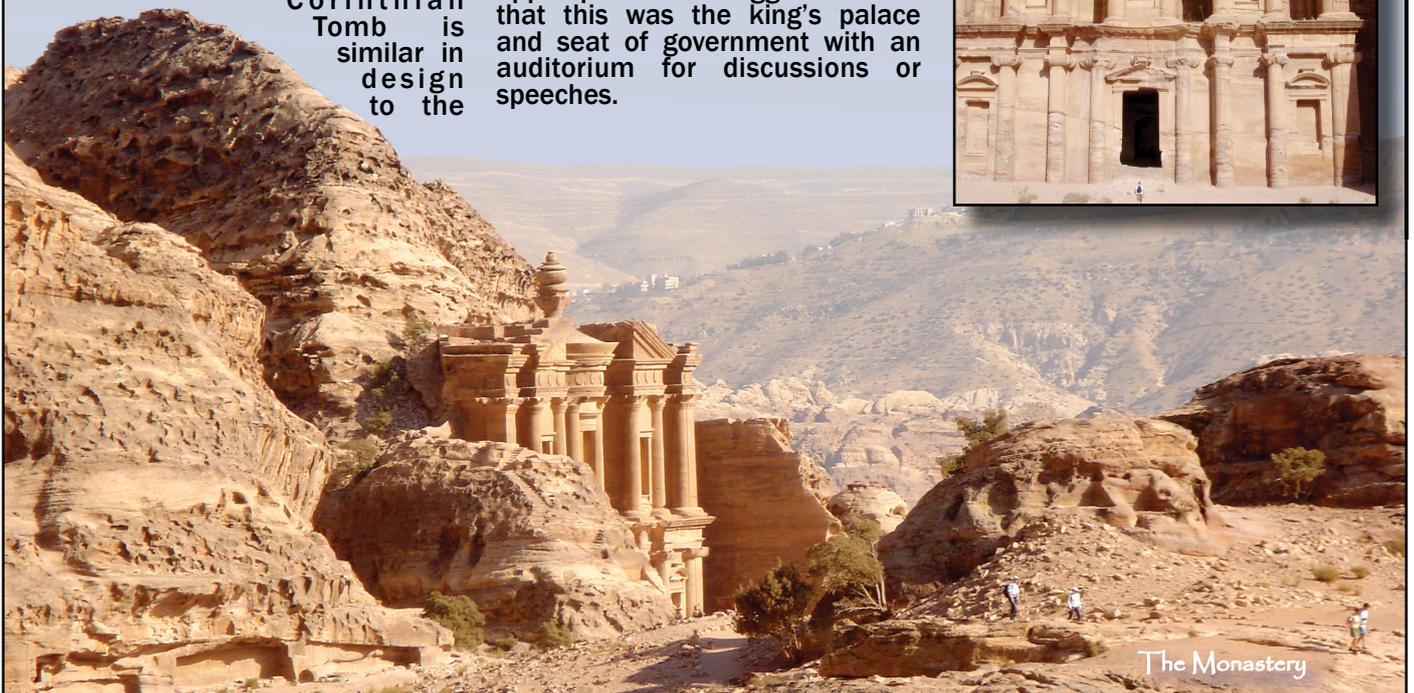
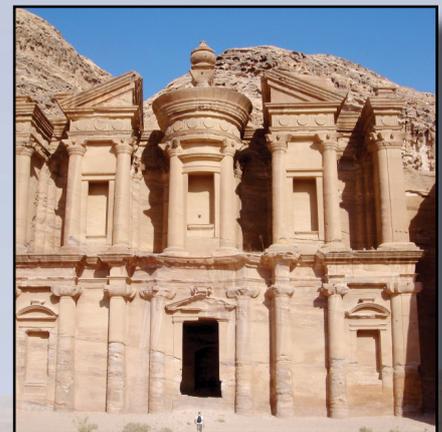
On the lower platform triple colonnades with 120 columns surrounded a paved courtyard with complex canalization and arched cellar rooms underneath. Most interestingly is a small amphitheatre with 560 to 620 seats in the main building on the upper platform. Suggestions are that this was the king's palace and seat of government with an auditorium for discussions or speeches.

The Palace of Pharaoh's Daughter

Qasr el-Bint Faroun is the main temple in Petra dedicated to the Nabataean god Dushara, who was symbolized by a simple skittle shaped black stone stele. The Greek looking temple with an open entrance hall with four columns was surrounded by a wall, as not everybody had access. For important religious ceremonies a 3m high altar on a raised platform was used in the open holy square in front of the main Petra temple.

The inner sanctum consisted of three marble covered chambers, Pronaos, Naos and Adyton with tables and side wall benches and this area was reserved for the thirteen priests and the king. It further contained a platform in the middle for the key cult object and raised chapels on either side with a staircase leading to the temple roof.

The main hall with plastered walls was richly decorated with gold ornaments and fragments found depict the face of the god of stars, Dushara and possibly the Greek god Helios as well, plus a gorgone with shielded uniform. Built during the reign of King Obodas III. or Aretas IV (30BC to 40AD) the temple was unfortunately damaged by two earthquakes.



The Monastery

The Monastery

This ceremonial building, ed-Deir in Arabic, is very similar in architecture and size (40m high and 47m wide – double the width of the Treasury) to the Treasury, but less decorated. It is also the most distant from the city center, situated out of sight on top of the eastern mountain range only reached via a two kilometer long climb up 800 stairs and 200m altitude difference. The trail is covered with many smaller tombs, eremite caves, tricliniums, places of sacrifice, niches, basins, cisterns and Nabataean inscriptions. Surprisingly some caves show painted linings to imitate brick walls.

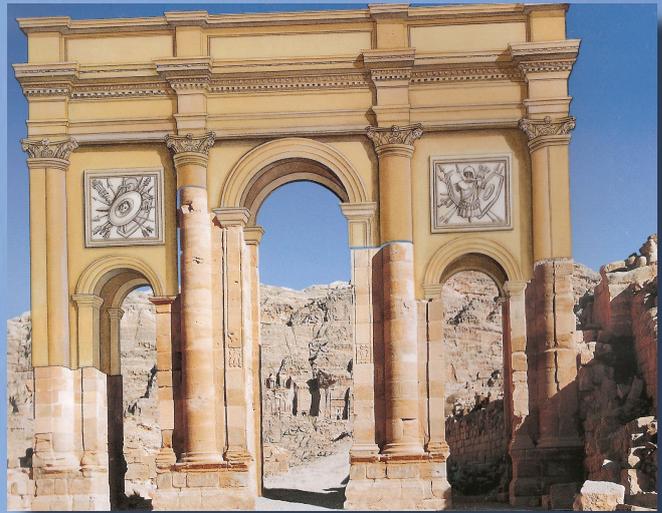
The Monastery looks in some way unfinished, as sculptures and ornaments are missing. It is assumed not to be a tomb, rather a temple or triclinium, as it has no burial chambers, but instead side benches, niches for steles at the back and a huge fore court for major ceremonies. Inscriptions indicate that it might have been a temple for King Obodas III. who was declared god like king. Certainly it was not his grave, as Obodas III. was buried, as one of the very few Nabataean kings outside Petra in the Nabataean city of Avedat in the Negev, which was therefore renamed after him.

Summary

Petra is a worldwide unique archaeological site which fascinates and intrigues visitors coming from all over the world. The reason for this lasting impression is created by the Greco-Roman looking temple like facades the Nabataeans inhabitants skillfully cut into the red sandstone cliffs in the Petra valley. What is further surprising is that these Nabataeans were simple Arab nomads who

embraced the cultural ideals and architectural elements of their most important trading partners the Greek and later the Romans.

This went so far that Nabataean traders often used Greek names and this is why we can not recognize them as Nabataean citizens when mentioned in historic records. Because they were so secretive about their trade and source of goods, Nabataeans did not keep any royal annals and records. This is why we have so little information and need to rely mostly on archaeological findings. As can be seen Petra has been much destroyed through war action, earthquakes, flash floods and the elements over time. Most of the remains are the monumental tomb facades and a few public buildings such as the impressive amphitheatre.



Valuable Tips

- Select the right time of year – winter months are best because of temperatures
- Plan for 2-3 days in Petra, you can do it in one day, but then you have not seen it all
- On 1st day do the main track from entrance via Treasury, Qasr el-Bint to Monastery
- On 2nd day do the mountain top tour el Hubta, Zibb Atuf, el Habis
- On 3rd day do the side Wadis and Little Petra 10kms away by car
- Stay at a hotel close to the entrance, such as the downtown Moevenpick
- Gates open at 6am, best time to leave is 7am, for photos you need good light
- Starting at 9am with 5,000 other daily visitors is too late for good viewing
- Take good walking shoes or boots, there is a lot of walking and climbing approx. 18kms
- We advise not to use local transport: horse back, then horse cart, camel & donkey
- Result: extra pay, unfriendly service, only short distances, can end up to pay 8 times
- You can lunch or have tea on site and buy water at different places, few toilets though
- Buy a good guide book, if forgotten you can get them at local book shops or hotels
- Use a local guide who can show you things you would otherwise not see and learn
- Websites and tourist information: www.visitjordan.com

