

Guiding light

A nosedive in tourism has been devastating for Jordan's communities – but things are finally looking brighter, reports **Karen Edwards**

Ali Al Amareen directs his green laser pointer into the clear night sky. "And that?" he says, outlining the seven stars that make up the Big Dipper. "That's Ursa Major." It's only 8pm but a blanket of stars is already twinkling above us. I'm in awe, not only of Al Amareen's knowledge, but also of the peace I feel in the heart of the Jordanian desert.

I'm spending the night at Feynan Ecolodge, an off-the-grid boutique property tucked between the sandstone and granite escarpments of the Dana Biosphere Reserve. It looks like a spectacular sandcastle, with candlelit hallways and staircases adding a cosy feel. Outside, Bedouin shepherds herd scores of goats down from the surrounding hills.

"We learn about the stars and seasons from our parents," Al Amareen explains. Later, he wheels out a high-powered telescope to shows me "one last thing".

"That's Saturn," he says, with a wide smile. I gasp at the clear sight of the ringed planet more than 800 million miles away and feel a wave of emotion as I blink back tears. What a place.

CHALLENGING TIMES

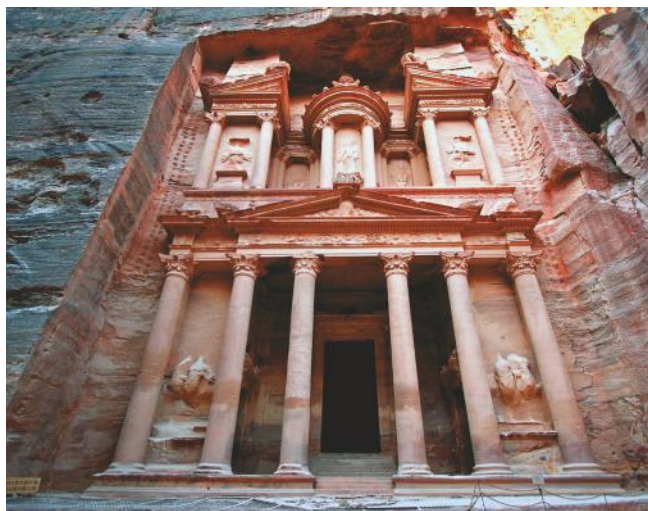
Despite such extraordinary experiences, Feynan Ecolodge – and many local businesses across Jordan – are facing a hardship they've not felt outside the pandemic years. Since the conflict between militant group Hamas and Israel broke out in October 2023, and the devastation that has since unfolded in Gaza and neighbouring West Bank, tourism has plummeted.

While British arrivals dropped by 31% in 2024, anecdotal evidence suggests that, at times, global arrival figures fell by as much as 70%. A country that was once working to prevent overtourism now faces the challenge of convincing the world it's safe to visit. ➤

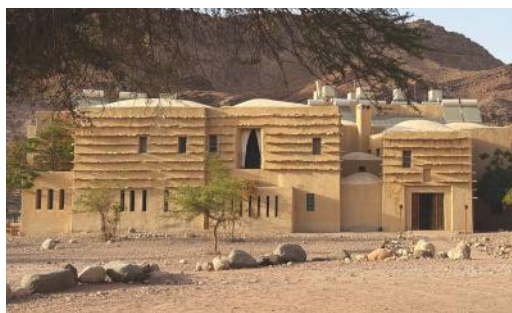
Desert rock arch,
Wadi Rum, Jordan
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DESTINATIONS

ESCORTED TOURS | JORDAN



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:
The Treasury; Nabila Al-Zoubi;
Wadi Rum; Feynan Ecolodge
PICTURES: G Adventures; Karen Edwards;
Shereen Mroueh



"We hear people are afraid to come," says Suleiman Hasaseen, a Bedouin tour guide based in Feynan. "Many people misunderstand this region. Those that come see our hospitality comes from the heart."

In the past two years, Jordan has had only one instance of short-notice airspace closure. The Foreign Office deems it safe, apart from a 1.9-mile zone along the Syrian border.

During my trip, I join G Adventures' 2025 GX Summit, an annual gathering of travel 'changemakers' timed to coincide with World Tourism Day, with the option to join one of several itineraries exploring the country.

Our group tour takes us north to Jerash, where the ruins of an ancient Greco-Roman citadel stand colossal against the buzzing backdrop of a modern city. Our guide, Zuhair Zuriqat, who hails from the area, tells us he's never seen it this quiet. Usually, hundreds of travellers visit the citadel each day. Today we are one of two groups, along with a scattering of independent visitors.

At Petra – the city founded by the Nabatean civilisation more than 2,000 years ago – we wander the sandstone gorge with just a handful of other visitors. Arriving at The Treasury, the most prominent rock tomb, with few people around is undeniably overwhelming. The En-Nejr theatre and Grand Temple are just as magnificent.

"Usually, Petra sees around 3,000-5,000

visitors a day in high season," notes Yazan Hijazeen, a tour guide from the Jordanian city of Karak. "There have been points in the past year where there have been no visitors at all."

POSITIVE IMPACT

The tide is beginning to turn with a recent reported uptick in arrivals, including on G Adventures' guided group tours. "Jordan has been caught in the crossfire of a lot of political issues, but it's a very safe place to [visit]," says the company's chief executive Bruce Poon Tip.

Indeed, exploring the country on an itinerary centred on locally owned businesses feels like the right way to rebuild, especially when including community-based tourism experiences supported by the company's non-profit partner, Planeterra.

At Beit Khayrat Souf – a cafe in the heart of Jerash – we meet founder Sumia Krishan, who explains how the enterprise began with just two local women in 2016. Today, more than 25 women work here. "We wanted to empower ladies to be financially independent," says Krishan.

Cooking with pots brought from home, Krishan built up a reputation with visitors through G Adventures and other community-focused operators. "We also rent a room next door, to create a day care centre for young children," she adds. "When the ladies are working here, they know their children are safe."

GX SUMMIT

Soumia Ait Bendawad, G Adventures' head of operations for the Middle East and North Africa, says: "This year, GX brought together 700 agents, travellers, media and suppliers from across the world, to not only showcase the destination, but also to discuss why community-based tourism is needed. Experiencing this together first-hand, we see how community tourism resonates more."

The next GX Summit takes place in Morocco in September and G Adventures has 15 spots for UK and Ireland agents to attend. The 10 agents making the most bookings between now and May 31 will earn a place, with five 'wildcard' spots for agents who make at least one booking and take part in challenges that include completing training modules and raising funds for Planeterra. Find out more at sherpa.gadventures.com/change-makers



The importance of community tourism is even more apparent near sleepy Ajloun, where I feast on *maqluba* – a traditional rice dish with chicken, flipped upside down before serving – with Nabila Al-Zoubi. Her homestay, Beit Sultana, is a welcome retreat for travellers looking for great local cuisine. The money Al-Zoubi earns goes towards training and employing local women to make in-demand products such as sun-dried tomatoes, honey and soap. "There isn't much work for women in this community," she tells me. "This is about providing opportunities."

As our trip culminates in downtown Amman at dusk, a sea of ochre lights decorates the skyline. Standing at the hilltop citadel with a panoramic view over the capital, I recall something else Hasaseen said to me: "We don't need much to be happy here, we enjoy a simple life. Maybe if more people felt like this, the world could be a better place." **TW**

BOOK IT

G Adventures offers 15 itineraries in Jordan, with nine community tourism enterprises incorporated into trips. The eight-day Highlights of Jordan round trip from Amman takes in Jerash, Petra, the Dead Sea, Aqaba and Wadi Rum. Prices start at £790 per person, excluding flights. gadventures.com