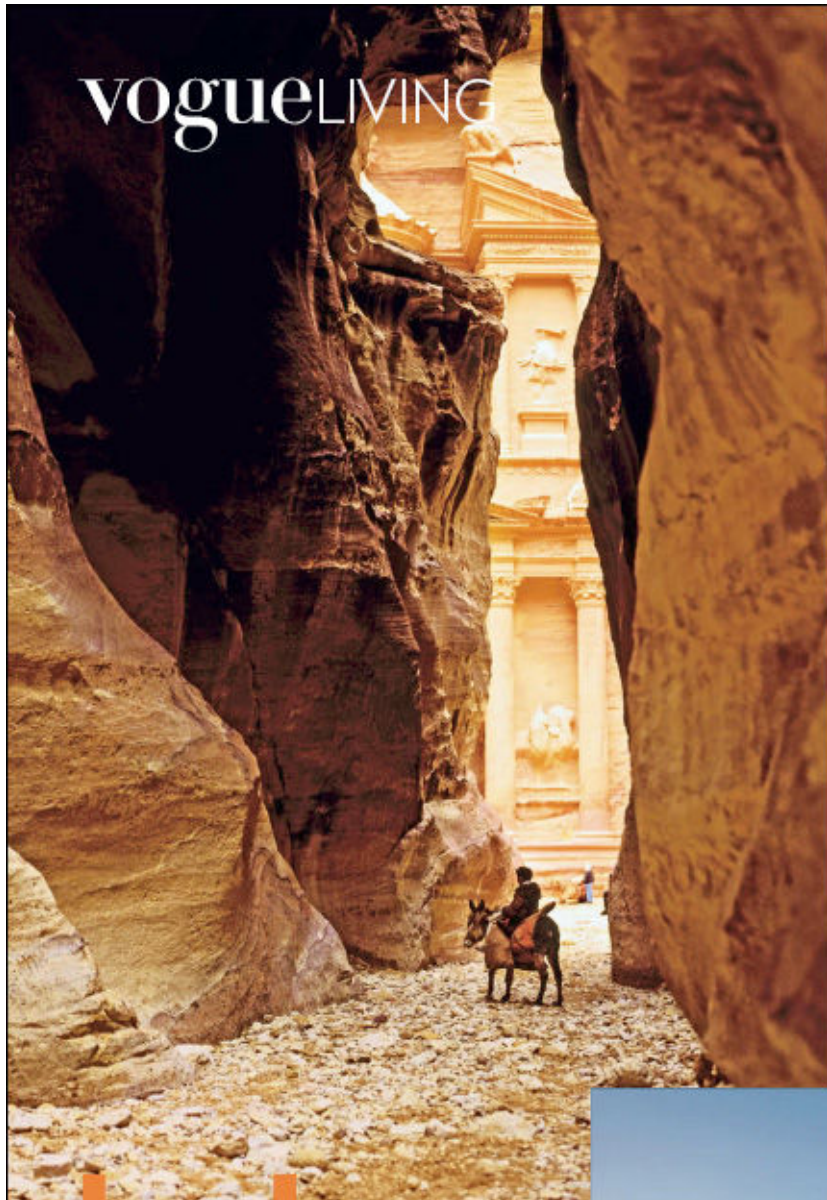




FOR ALL SEASONS

Wind down, gear up or simply luxuriate—Jordan's delights will fascinate every kind of traveller, finds JULIE EAGLETON



ANCIENT TREASURES

Clockwise from top left: The treasury in Petra; Aqaba's sandy shores; Jordanian mint tea; the Abu Darwish mosque in Amman

Home to the world's largest natural spa—the Dead Sea—the coral-laden Red Sea and the ancient city of Petra, Jordan isn't simply an oasis of peace in one of the most troubled parts of the Middle East. It's also a year-round destination that can show you its best sights in just five days, no matter what kind of tourist you are.

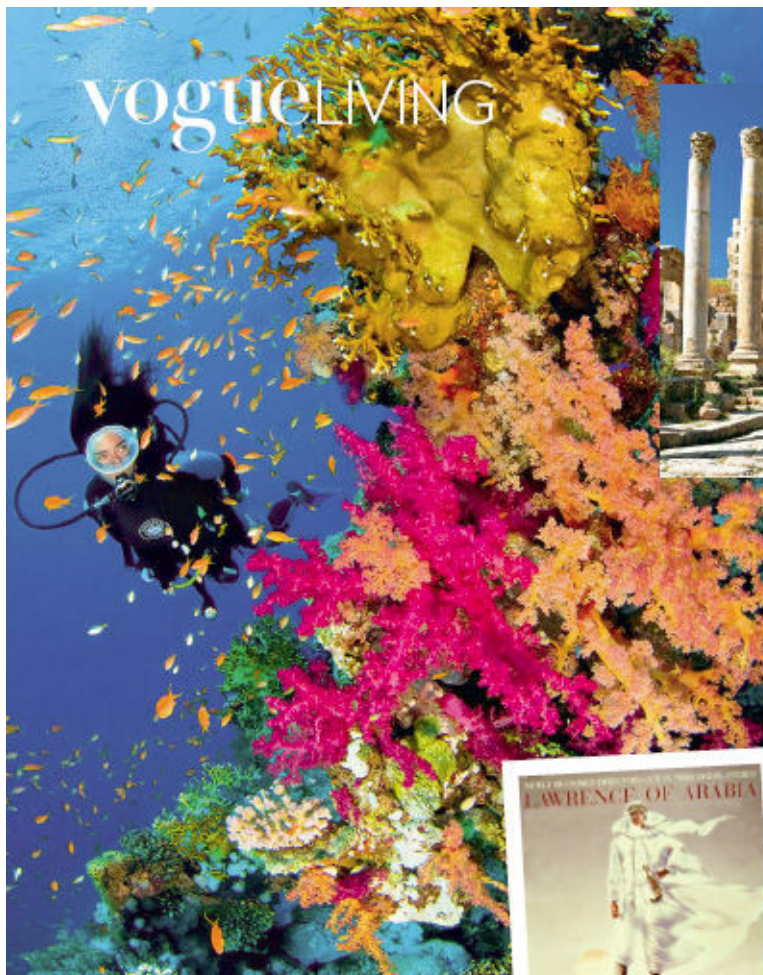
FOR CALM-SEEKERS

If you're a spa lover like me, the Dead Sea, deep in the Jordan Rift Valley at 422m below sea level, is where you will find natural nirvana. The valley is believed to be the site of five Biblical cities: Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, Zebouin and Zoar. A giant milky paradise, it has gentle waters lapping against what seem to be snow-covered rocks but are in fact salted domes. Due to the extremely high level of salts (four

times that of most oceans) and 35 types of minerals, there's no marine life in this sea. But its curative and therapeutic powers work wonders for those with arthritis, rheumatism and eczema. My skin felt butter-soft within minutes and the magical buoyancy of the water provided the most comfortable aquatic sofa imaginable. It's impossible to do anything except lay back, relax and allow yourself to simply float along through the mystical landscape.

FOR THRILL-CHASERS

When in the capital city of Amman, head to the Abu Darwish, a hilltop mosque, and enjoy fabulous views of the city as you ascend. But if desert adventure is your thing, a drive through the dramatic wilderness of Wadi Rum, also known as the Valley of the Moon, makes for an unforgettable journey. >



HOLIDAY HAVEN

Clockwise from top left: Scuba-diving in the Red Sea; the ancient colonnade at Jerash; Wadi Rum's Burdah Arch; *Lawrence Of Arabia*, shot in Jordan

The 1962 film *Lawrence Of Arabia* was filmed here and TE Lawrence himself described the valley as "vast, echoing and godlike". You can journey by camel, but I chose a jeep safari to navigate this huge expanse of desert, which ranges in colour from pure white to Martian red. From a golden haze of sandy valleys, huge bronze mountains of sandstone and granite suddenly emerge like a mirage. Narrow canyons cut deep, many concealing drawings of camels and human-like figures holding hands, etched millions of years ago by desert dwellers. Bedouin tribes still live among the mountains and occasionally you can spot their large goat-hair tents dotted along the horizon. I forgot to wear my keffiyeh and was consequently sprinkled by a gentle shower of sand. After a quick brush down, solace was sought in a cup of Jordanian tea (black, with cardamom and sage, served with plenty

of sugar and mint) under the shade of a Bedouin tent; the consummate spot from which to marvel at Wadi Rum's crimson and gold-streaked sunset.

FOR LUXE LOVERS

The Red Sea resort town of Aqaba in the far south of Jordan is a must for divers and for those seeking a little more lavishness at their beach resorts. Home to 500 species of coral, 1,200 species of fish and crystal-clear waters, the Red Sea is one of the world's most exotic and fascinating environments. Aqaba is ideal for year-round scuba diving and there are 21 dive sites to explore. Non-divers can snorkel, windsurf, take it easy on the beach or unwind at a luxury spa. The Mövenpick Resort & Spa Tala Bay Aqaba (Moevenpick-hotels.com) is the place to stay. Its spa, Zara, is heaven

on earth. Walk through its 'experience showers', which incorporate coloured lighting and fragrances, or take a brave jump into the invigorating ice fountain, said to improve circulation and help tighten the skin.

FOR HISTORY BUFFS

If you're looking for a piece of the past, the 'lost' city of Petra is the ultimate experience. The UNESCO World Heritage Site had been hidden in the mountains for thousands of years before it was discovered in 1812. It is often referred to as the 'rose-red city' after the dusky pink cliffs from which its temples, tombs and other buildings have been carved. UNESCO describes it as 'one of the most precious cultural properties of man's cultural heritage'. Though easily recognisable from its appearance in *Indiana Jones And The Last Crusade*, nothing really prepares you for your first sight of this Jordanian jewel.

Enter through the Siq (the shaft), a narrow gorge, over 1km in length, flanked by 80m swirling cliffs. Walking through the Siq is an experience in itself. Excitement mounts with every twist and turn of the extended rock labyrinth until, finally, you catch your first glimpse of the majestic Al-Khazneh (the treasury). This formidable building, carved in the early first century as the tomb of a Nabataean king, is over 40m high and a breathtaking introduction to the city.

Further ahead is an enormous theatre chiselled from the hillside, expertly placed to bring the greatest number of tombs into view. The valley opens on to the plain, and here the true splendour of the city rolls out before you. It has been said that Petra was designed to strike wonder into all who entered it. Standing here and feeling quite minute, even such a lofty description seems something of an understatement. ■

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