



Essential Jordan

Nabataean, Roman, Christian and Islamic sites

18 October–26 October 2025

(ML 829)

9 days • £5,810

Lecturer: Professor Graham Philip

Outstanding monuments of several civilisations – Nabataean, Roman, Early Christian, Umayyad and Crusader.

Petra is the most spectacular archaeological site in the Middle East; we spend three nights here.

Stunning natural landscapes, with time spent at the Dead Sea.

Jordan possesses the most spectacular archaeological site in the Middle East – Petra, ‘rose-red city, half as old as time’, that easternly fascinating, westernly Baroque, altogether extraordinary city of the desert.

Hidden in the mountains at the confluence of several caravan routes, many of its finest monuments are hewn from the living rock, brilliantly coloured sandstone striated with pinks, ochres and blue-greys. Its creators, the Nabataeans, drew on a range of Mediterranean and oriental styles to create a novel synthesis – uniquely Nabataean but with architectural evocations of the Hellenistic world, Egypt, Assyria and Imperial Rome.

The Nabataeans were an Arab people, first recorded in the fourth century BC, who grew rich by controlling the trade routes across an empire stretching from Saudi Arabia to Syria. With Petra their capital, these nomadic desert traders became administrators and city-dwellers, whose kingdom was eventually incorporated into the Roman Empire. But decline set in, and by the eighth century AD Petra had become virtually uninhabited.

In Roman times part of the wealthy provinces of Syria and Arabia, Jordan is also rich in traces of other civilisations. Jerash is one of the best preserved and most beautiful of Roman cities. Remains of Byzantine churches, with very fine floor mosaics, lie scattered through the Jordanian hills and valleys – themselves the settings of many events recorded in the Old Testament. The varied arts of Islam are seen in the hunting lodges and desert retreats of the sophisticated and pleasure-loving Umayyad dynasty of the mid-seventh to mid-eighth centuries. And the castles of the Crusaders and their Arab opponents are among the most impressive examples of medieval military architecture anywhere.



Petra, Ed-Deir (‘The Monastery’), lithograph by Louis Haghe after David Roberts c. 1850.

A constant backdrop to all this are the awesomely beautiful mountains, gorges and deserts of today’s Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. Created after the First World War and the downfall of the Ottoman Empire, Jordan’s borders are an almost arbitrary outcome of the Franco-British re-ordering of the Levant. Something of a backwater then, and constantly buffeted since by the disputatiousness of larger neighbours, Jordan has – against all odds – succeeded in steering a precarious course to survival, stability and modest prosperity.

Itinerary

Day 1. Fly at c. 5.00pm (Royal Jordanian) from London Heathrow to Amman. Arrive at the hotel shortly before 1.00am. First of three nights in Amman.

Day 2: Amman, Jerash. Southwest of Amman, the cave-strewn hills of Iraq al Amir, are also the backdrop to Qasr al Abd (the Palace of the Servant), a rare example of a grand Hellenistic country residence. Drive north through red earth hills with olive groves and Aleppo pine woods. Jerash, ancient Gerasa, a leading city of the Decapolis and very prosperous in the second and third centuries AD, is one of the best-preserved and most beautiful of ruined Roman cities and we spend the afternoon there.

Among the more spectacular remains are a triumphal arch, an oval piazza, the *Cardo*, with its flanking colonnades, a food market, hippodrome, theatres, magnificent temples of Zeus and Artemis and several early Christian churches.

Day 3: Amman, Umayyad desert residences. The citadel in Amman was the religious and political centre of the ancient city. Here are the remains of the Temple of Hercules, the rebuilt Umayyad palace. To the east of Amman, in the desert, are remarkable survivals from the Umayyad Caliphs, the first dynasty of Islam – early eighth-century small pleasure palaces and hunting lodges. The fortress-like desert complex of Qasr Kharana; the fort of Azraq, originally Roman, rebuilt in the 13th century and used by T.E. Lawrence as his HQ for two months in 1917–18. Break for lunch at the Azraq Lodge, a former British military field hospital, before continuing to the UNESCO world heritage site of Qasr Amra, whose unique and exceptionally beautiful wall paintings were recently restored in a project coordinated by the World Monuments Fund.

Day 4: Amman, Madaba, Karak. Leaving Amman, drive southwards along the Biblical King’s Highway to the archaeological park at Madaba. Proceed to The 12th-century Crusader

Essential Jordan
continued

castle of Karak, modified by the Mamluks in the 13th century, is an impressive example of medieval military architecture with many chambers surviving. First of three nights in Petra.

Day 5: Petra. The Siq, the narrow mile-long crevice with its Nabataean carvings and hydraulic system would itself merit a detour, but it is just the prelude to one of the most astonishing archaeological sites in the Middle East (also a UNESCO world heritage site). Emerging from the Siq, the visitor is confronted by the temple-like façade of the 'Treasury', vast in scale, both oriental and classical in vocabulary, Hellenistic in inspiration but uniquely Nabataean – supreme among Petra's wealth of sculptured monuments and those that follow on the 'Street of Façades'. These are mainly tombs, created in the living rock. There are also impressive remains in the heart of the city, from grand temples, public buildings and churches to houses. Not the least striking feature is the multicoloured, striated but predominantly red sandstone. After lunch, return to the hotel or climb, via the Soldier Tomb complex, up to the High Place of Sacrifice (c. 800 steps) where the cultic installations are still clearly visible.

Day 6: Petra. For the second day in Petra walk again through the Siq, past the 'Street of Façades' and the theatre to study the more open area around the paved and colonnaded street. The remains of various structures include two mighty buildings, the 'Great Temple' and Qasr al Bint. Recent excavations have revealed what is almost certainly a cathedral with 5th- and 6th-century mosaic floors. Climb up (over 900 steps) to one of the finest rock-cut façades, Ed-Deir (the Monastery), and some staggering views of hills and valleys of contorted rock.

Day 7: Little Petra, Dead Sea. 'Little Petra', a narrow gorge with three natural widenings, thought to be an ancient commercial centre with carved façades and chambers and a fragment of naturalistic Nabataean painting. A spectacular descent through rugged sandstone leads to Wadi Araba, part of the Jordanian section of the Great Rift Valley. Stop at the Museum at the Lowest Place on Earth featuring important archaeological finds recovered from the region, including artefacts from the church and monastery of St Lot. Reach the hotel on the Dead Sea shore mid-afternoon to relax and swim. First of two nights in Sweimeh.

Day 8: Mount Nebo, Madaba. Drive up from

the Dead Sea, flanked by dramatic mountain scenery. Visit the Byzantine church with remarkable mosaics on Mount Nebo, the reputed burial site of Moses. The nearby Church of SS Lot & Procopius, with its mosaic decoration dates from the sixth century. From the same period, the unique mosaic map of the Holy Land in the church of St George at Madaba is another highlight.

Day 9. Drive to Amman airport (1 hour). Arrive Heathrow c. 3.30pm.

Lecturer

Professor Graham Philip. Works in the Department of Archaeology at Durham University, where he specialises in the prehistoric and Bronze Age archaeology of southwest Asia. Before joining Durham in 1994, he worked in Baghdad and then in Amman as Assistant Director of the Council for British Research in the Levant. He has directed field projects in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon and currently leads the Durham component of the multi-institutional heritage protection project Endangered Archaeology in the Middle East and North Africa. Current research interests include landscape archaeology – including the analysis of satellite imagery – and the study of ancient material culture.

Practicalities

Price, per person. Two sharing: £5,810 or £5,230 without flights. **Single occupancy:** £6,870 or £6,290 without flights.

Included: flights (economy class) on scheduled Royal Jordanian return flights (aircraft: Boeing 787); private coach for all other journeys; hotel accommodation as described below; breakfasts, 7 lunches (including 2 picnics) and 5 dinners (plus a snack on arrival on day 1) with wine, water and coffee; all admissions; all gratuities; all taxes; the services of the lecturers and a local guide.

Visas: required for most foreign nationals. Passports do not have to be submitted in advance. A group visa is issued on arrival (the cost is included in the price of the tour as long as you are travelling with the group). Passports must be valid for six months beyond the dates of the tour.

Accommodation. The Intercontinental, Amman (intercontinental.com): modern and excellently located 5-star hotel. **Mövenpick**

Hotel, Petra (moevenpick-hotels.com): modern and excellently located hotel close to the site. Rated 5-star but more comparable to a 4-star hotel. **Dead Sea Marriott Resort & Spa, Sweimeh** (marriott.co.uk): a 5-star resort nestled on the shores of the Dead Sea, with newly enhanced spacious guest rooms. The hotel also offers indoor and outdoor pools. *Single rooms throughout are doubles for sole use.*

How strenuous? This tour is quite demanding and you must be capable of walking all day over rough sites. A good level of fitness and sure-footedness is essential throughout, especially in order to manage the climbs in Petra to Ed-Deir and the High Place. Many sites are exposed with little or no shelter from the sun. Average distance by coach per day: 72 miles.

Group size: between 10 and 22 participants.