

PETRA—Beat the Bohunks

Our much-anticipated visit to Petra was finally here. One thing was certain--our group of five, who were on a private tour, wanted to get to the site earlier than the bus groups from our ship as well as other tourists.

We set off on our two-hour drive through amazing landscape (higher mountains than expected much of the way). Finally we arrive in the very hilly town of Petra. After parking, we were ready for the gradual downhill walk to the site. The question was whether we would be able to engage a horse-driven "chariot" for one or two of our members.

Our guide told us you could hire one to go one-way or round-trip but the cost would be \$30 either way. So one could walk down and get the carriage for the return trip.

The carriage situation was just one of the several bits of misinformation we had received from various reputable sources regarding visiting Petra. I had been told that there was a very limited supply of carriages and that you could only have them round trip. I had been told—or read—that there were no longer horses available for the ride in or out of site. There was an abundance of them.

The walk down took about an hour with our stops along the way so that our guide could point out various bits of information. The walk was sometimes easy and sometimes a bit more challenging when we came to the stone pavements that the Romans had laid. (This is one road that the Romans couldn't make straight.) When we got to the narrow Siq (passageway), we followed the twisting and turning road not having a clue how much further we had to go. There were many magnificent variously colored rock formations along the way.

Finally our guide Tariq called us over to one side of the passage and said that in a few moments we would have our first view of the Treasury, as one of the most famous buildings from the ancient world is called. And there it was: a sliver of the spectacular façade. I can't think of any other renowned world site that one comes upon so gradually; every other one that I can recall is seen first from a distance.

On we went on a bit further and then we came into the open. It was just as glorious as we expected. The wonderful thing about arriving early was that there were very few people in front of us; there were a couple of camels, waiting to take travelers to the rest of the site. (I had never been told about them.)

Some went inside but there wasn't much to see—just the different strata of stone.

Tariq gave us an option then—continuing further or ending our tour right there. Two stayed behind grabbing a seat and a coke. The others of us went about a quarter mile further. I had certainly wanted to see than just the one magnificent building. We were then able to see the amphitheatre, the caves and graves in the walls of stone and high up

the facades of the palaces of the royals. There was a flight of stairs that went 800 feet up the rocks and one person with backpack was making his way up.

The actual city lies many feet below the present surface and who knows if it will ever be excavated.

By the time we walked back to The Treasury, about a half hour after first viewing it, the crowd had increased exponentially. There were the obvious bus groups (at least five from our ship) and, surprisingly, many groups of school children and many Arabs, whether Jordanian or not, we couldn't tell. We were indeed right to arrive early.

Our guide offered to go with our friend who wanted the carriage and the rest started our slow trek back up. By now it was getting hot along part of the way although we were protected from the sun part of the time. As it turned out there were no carriages immediately available, so our friend and guide started walking. Luckily a carriage was returning empty so our guide grabbed it.

The walk back was a bit less than an hour so we did okay.

I asked our guide if there would be a partial refund because the return ride wasn't the whole way. This totally infuriated him. Tariq responded that we wasn't pocking the money and didn't like to talk about money.

We then went on to discuss lunch possibilities and he was hesitant because he "didn't like criticism." We elected to go to the Jordanian restaurant high on the hill in the town of Petra. It was clean, had a view and had a buffet of quite good Middle Eastern food, which I like and the others not so much. And it was reasonable.

Oh, what a place. Oh, what a day.