

PETRA

City in the rock.

INQUIRING MINDS



In 1812, Swiss explorer Johann Ludwig Burckhardt, made a remarkable discovery. Guided by local Bedouin, he found the ancient “lost” city of Petra in Jordan. It was built by the Nabataeans, a group of Arabian nomads who settled in the area at the end of the 6th century BC. As master rock carvers, they chiselled out Petra’s palaces, monuments, temples, and tombs from the surrounding sandstone mountains. Reigning as the wealthy capital of a powerful trading empire, Petra was home to 30,000 Nabataeans at the height of its prosperity. But shifting caravan routes and earthquakes eventually led to its decline, and after the Crusades in the 12th century, only local Arabs knew of its existence. That is, until Burckhardt revealed the secret to the modern world. Today, Petra is a UNESCO World Heritage Site that ranks among the New Seven Wonders of the World—and it’s one of the most eye-popping collection of ruins globe-trotting travellers can visit.

Riding a horse from the entrance gates down a stony track sets the mood before dismounting at the Siq, a deep narrow gorge that is the main route for entering the ancient city. Flanked on either side by dusky pink cliffs that soar 80 metres high, the Siq twists and turns for more than a kilometre. Stone idols line the sheer rock walls, and guides point out a network of terracotta pipes that brought water into the city. Horse-drawn carriages clip-clop along limestone slabs laid by the Romans after they invaded Petra in AD 106.

Suddenly, at the end of the cool, dark Siq, you see the sun shining golden on a thin slice of Al Khazneh (the Treasury). Turn the corner, and Petra’s most photographed structure bursts into full dramatic view. It’s impossible

not to gape at the towering two-storey façade, which is beautifully carved with 12 Corinthian columns (which represent the months in a year), seven cups of wine (for the days in a week), and 30 roses (representing the days in a month). It was originally a royal tomb, and legend has it that treasure was hidden in the giant urn on the second level—hence the Treasury’s name. You can see the bullet holes left by Bedouin who, having believed the tale to be true, shot at the urn in hopes of releasing the treasure.

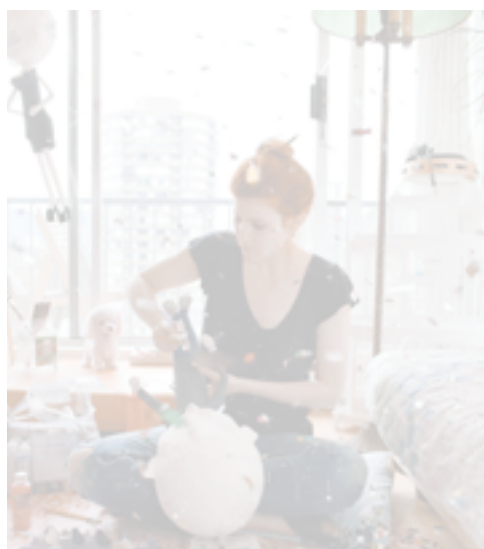
Beyond the Treasury, a colonnaded street leads down a valley of red sand to the vast central city area with an amphitheatre, cave houses, the Royal Tombs, and several large temples. But it’s worth veering off to hike the rough steps up to the High Place of Sacrifice. Here, on top of the windy mountain, priests once performed animal sacrifices, evidenced by altars and drains for collecting the blood. There’s also a humble dirt-floor shack selling deathly strong Turkish coffee.

You need the jolt because, after the trek back down, another 850 polished granite steps point the way to Petra’s largest edifice—Ad-Deir (the Monastery). “Taxi? Air condition taxi?” joke Bedouin boys; some visitors trade the tortuous climb for a donkey or camel ride up instead. Yet whether arriving by foot or beast, the reward is another magnificently carved façade and stunning mountain views. Gazing upon the mighty structure, the famous words immortalizing Petra by Victorian poet John William Burgon spring to mind: “Match me such marvel, save in Eastern clime,— / A rose-red city—half as old as Time!” **JANICE MUCALOV**

FROM TOP: Al Khazneh, the Treasury (top) and the Nabataean tombs (bottom) at Petra, a UNESCO World Heritage Site.



PETRA AL KHAZNEH PHOTO BY HOLGER METTJE/ISTOCKPHOTO AND NABATAEAN TOMBS PHOTO BY YORY FRENKLAKH/ISTOCKPHOTO. PINATA PHOTO BY TRISTAN CASEY.



PERSONAL FIESTA

Papier-mâché bespoke creations.

No garden party is quite complete without the bashing and bludgeoning of a piñata. And nothing is more exhilarating than tearing away your blindfold to dive dizzily into a flurry of arms and legs, gathering what you can of its showering innards. Vancouver’s crafty Meghan Kennedy has harnessed the hilarity of this papier mâché tradition, with her custom piñata company, YourPinata.com.

Here, you can contact Ms. Kennedy to create piñatas in the likeness of, well, just about anybody—the guest of honour perhaps, or better yet, a mutual enemy. The

latter was the case for will.i.am of the Black Eyed Peas fame, who Kennedy presented this year with a piñata resembling gossip blogger Perez Hilton—a facetious jab at their 2009 MuchMusic Video Awards celebrity showdown. Kennedy was equally happy to smash her own piñata doppelgänger when they arrived at a party wearing the same Roberto Cavalli dress. But she also creates kinder caricatures of friends and family members, whose heads you can fill with all sorts of prizes; the kind of sweet nothings you know and love them for. **CRAIG DAVID LONG**