

Painting the desert green

IN THE PARCHED CENTRE OF JORDAN, AT THE END OF A RUGGED TRACK WITHIN THE DANA BIOSPHERE RESERVE, SITS FEYNAN ECOLODGE. THE SOLAR-POWERED SETTLEMENT INTEGRATES CONSERVATION AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT WITH EXPLORATION AND DISCOVERY, RE-DEFINING ECO-TOURISM

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A Bedouin man walks over to greet us

as we pull in to the reception centre for Feynan Ecolodge in Jordan. We're late. Navigation is a challenge when local signs are written in a calligraphic script no-one in the vehicle can read, perhaps something we should have thought about before we set off from Amman's Queen Alia airport.

I'm catching up with friends Caroline and Dylan who've recently moved to Jordan, and so far the eco-escape I've booked is proving elusive. We have a transfer booked from here, but our host eyes the car and decides we can make it on our own. "You have a good car," he grins. "Go eight kilometres and left." A few metres down the road, there's a sign, leading onto a dirt road. We bounce and rattle in the dark as the route slowly narrows and becomes less defined.

"Feynan?" he asks through the window. "Yes, yes," we answer in unison. He gestures that he'll join us in the car. "Suleiman," he adds by way of introduction.

Dylan pumps the break when we reach a dry river bed. "Do you think we can make it?" he asks. "Sure," I reply — after all, it's not my car. He puts his foot down and we bounce over the rim, where the path forks. "Left?" Caroline tentatively suggests. Dylan shrugs, tugging on the wheel. Moments later we're surrounded by palm trees and the track has petered out. "There," indicates Dylan imagining some faded tyre-tracks. "While I appreciate your optimism, that is not a path," I mutter. Dylan ignores me. We round a bend and reach an impasse. I refrain from releasing the "I told you so," sitting on the tip of my tongue. ⇒



PREVIOUS PAGE: Feynan Ecolodge takes its green status seriously. CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Bedouin bread is cooked in the ash and coals of the fire; no meal is complete without tea; a young man tends a herd of goats; the cliffs around Wadi Ghwayr glow burnt-orange; the sun sets behind a lone tree; a passageway in the gorge gleams in the afternoon sun.

We are invited into several Bedouin campsites, plied with tea and deliciously-crusty fresh bread cooked beneath the coals and ash of the fire

We retrace our steps to a stone wall and drive within, to find ourselves in a camel enclosure. Turning back a man rushes towards us out of the darkness. "Feynan?" he asks through the window. "Yes, yes," we answer in unison. He gestures that he'll join us in the car. "Suleiman," he adds by way of introduction. "I think Suleiman will come with us if we give him a ride home afterwards," I prompt, opening the car door and scooting over to make space. Suleiman happily climbs in, pointing left and right, guiding us through the darkness.

A shadowy figure meets the car when we finally pull up at the lodge, unperturbed by the fact that we have hijacked a local Bedouin. "I am Suleiman too," he says, leading us into a squat building, hunkering in the dusty clearing. The entrance is lined with candles, flickering shadows dancing on the sandstone-coloured walls. Feynan Ecolodge takes its green status seriously – there is no electricity here, apart from in the depths of the reception area and within guest bathrooms.

We greedily gobble down heaped plates of delicious vegetarian cuisine the chef has kindly kept for us, before Suleiman shows us to our rooms. He lights tea candles nestled in wall-brackets, the ensuing glow generating a cosy ambience. I extinguish the flames with my yawns, the room bathed in silvery moonlight as I snuggle into my comfortable bed, swathed in netting.

A knock on the door accompanied by a cheerful "Good morning," wakes me and I rush to the balcony. The sun is coating the majestically-bare desert mountains in a golden glow. There is a barren beauty in the landscape of the Dana Biosphere Reserve, Jordan's largest nature reserve, covering some 320 square-kilometres of jagged land along the face of the Great Rift Valley.

Caroline and Dylan have beaten me to breakfast. As I plonk down my plate of flatbread, boiled eggs, falafel and honey, all locally-sourced, a herd of goats trips past, one making a beeline for the restaurant-terrace where it swiftly snatches a napkin before the staff shoo it away. I am draining the last few drops from my coffee cup when Suleiman finds us, handing over water-bottles for the hike planned for today.

We drive to the starting point, Suleiman directing. "See, it is a path," says Dylan smugly as we follow the track from the previous night. "Well yes, but it wasn't the right path, was it?" I shoot back. We park under a tree and follow Suleiman into the Wadi Ghwayr basin. A stream winds through the gorge, lined with oleanders, palm trees and acacias. It becomes progressively greener the further we venture. We skip from one side of the stream to the other, scrambling over boulders and rock formations. The sky is a brilliant-blue and the cliffs blaze burnished-ochre.



Suleiman educates us on the finer points of Bedouin culture. Here, he stops to point out a tiny frog clinging to a rock, there, he picks some shoots, mashing them into a soapy hand-wash. He divulges the medicinal uses of the plants along the river-bed, and tells stories of tending goats in the mountains. He is from a Bedouin tribe who still call this area home.

As the sun creeps across the sky Suleiman motions us to rest, selecting a platform overlooking the gorge as our picnic spot. We devour packed lunches while he builds a small fire – no meal is complete in Bedouin culture without partaking in tea. He delves into his pack and pulls out two canisters, shaking tea-leaves from one into the pot. From the second he pulls dried herbs, adding them into the mix. The result is a delicious sugar-loaded sage tea, served in small shot-glasses.

"Let's keep going to the most beautiful point of Wadi Ghwayr," Suleiman says, continuing along the canyon to a lush oasis. Moss drips from the rock walls, and palm trees shoot up from the crevices. The stream babbles merrily through a slit in the narrow canyon walls, which gleams in the sun like a hidden passageway from *Indiana Jones*.

Returning to the lodge we stop to watch the sunset, dragging our weary bodies to the top of a small, rocky hill. A lone tree engulfs the golden orb as the sky turns yellow, then orange, then dusky-mauve on its journey towards inky-black.

After a well-earned dinner we relax on the lodge's rooftop landing, using a powerful telescope to pick out craters on the Moon's surface. Suleiman points out the major constellations, the stars forming a twinkling catwalk through the mountain passage.

The next morning, as part of our Bedouin Experience we learn the lodge is owned by the Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature (RSCN) and operated by EcoHotels. Part of its charter is to employ staff from local, indigenous communities. An almost symbiotic relationship has developed between the Bedouin community and the lodge. We are invited into several Bedouin campsites, plied with tea and deliciously-crusty fresh bread cooked beneath the coals and ash of the fire. We meet women making goat-leather products as part of a handicraft project and participate in a coffee ritual, the beans roasted and ground in front of us. In the final tent, a young woman burns cotton rags dipped in olive oil, applying the charcoal around our eyes with a matchstick; a Bedouin-style beauty salon. Suleiman is most impressed with the results.

As Dylan loads the car in preparation for the journey back to Amman I look back at the lodge, loath to leave. Suleiman stands at the entrance, hand raised in a gesture of farewell. "Come back any time," he calls as we clamber into the vehicle. I think I will. ☺

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