

In an article first published on the Cicerone Press website, Tony Howard relates the history of the Jordan Trail from the first inklings of an idea to the trail becoming official after twenty years of exploration.

All great projects start with Lawrence of Arabia

It all started a long time ago at Christmas 1983. After seeing David Lean's 'Lawrence of Arabia' film and following months of subsequent seemingly unheeded correspondence I eventually obtained permission from Jordan's Tourism Ministry to visit [Wadi Rum](#) in the desert near Aqaba. It was there that much of the film's action took place re-enacting the Arab Revolt against the Turks with which Lawrence was involved. Alan Baker, Mick Shaw, Di Taylor and I discovered a rock climbing bonanza now recognised as "amongst the world's best desert climbing areas" with its "Bedouin climbs being amongst the world's best mountain adventures".



Di and Tony

The Zalabia Bedouin of Rum immediately appreciated the potential benefits of what we were doing and shared their knowledge of the area. They welcomed us to their camps, told us the names of their mountains and pointed out their many Bedouin hunting routes, in so doing becoming lifetime friends. Then, on our next visit to Wadi Rum the following year we invited an old friend of ours, Wilfried Colonna to join us to continue work on a climbing guidebook. We also explored further afield discovering a nice, if easy, trek down an impressive valley from the ancient and almost abandoned cliff top village of Dana to the Roman copper mines of Finnan in the depths of Wadi Araba in Jordan's Rift Valley. We returned via what we called 'Petra's Secret Canyon', another nice discovery through which we emerged into Petra to the surprise of the local Bdul Bedouin. On our continuing annual and sometimes bi-annual Rum trips, Di Taylor and I always found time to explore a little further. Jordan's 'Grand Canyon', the Mujib Gorge, was next as it had grabbed our attention when crossing its headwaters on the ancient road of The King's Highway. It was a committing adventure as everyone we asked said it was impossible and there was no way out as the Dead Sea road hadn't reached its end.

Everyone said it was impossible... We went anyway.

We went anyway, starting late one afternoon and reaching the Dead Sea two days later where we were happy to find road builders. Less happy that the Jordanian army didn't believe our story and thought we were spies from Israel but a phone call to the Tourism Minister saved the day. Other trips followed, finding some splendid trekking country in the wild and lonely mountains south of Petra "where only Allah and the Bedouin live" according to a Bedouin who invited us to his camp. Then we decided to have a look up north to see if we could connect the hilltop Islamic castle of Ajloun with Greco-Roman Pella down in the Jordan Valley. To our surprise we found a wonderful two day trek through forested dales and amongst flower-filled fields. There were even unclimbed cliffs of immaculate limestone and stories of caves. It seemed Jordan's adventure tourism potential was endless and we had it to ourselves. The Jordanians were forever asking why we were walking when someone could drive us to our destination. Other than shepherds, no one walked anywhere.

It seemed Jordan's adventure tourism potential was endless and we had it to ourselves.



Above: Jebel Rum stands aloof above the Jordan Trail and dwarfs a tent of the local Bedouin whose homeland this is, amongst "some of the world's best desert climbing"

Below: Blue Sinai lizard, Petra, and (bottom) springtime on the Jordan Trail



By the mid 1990s we had finished the second edition of our [Rum Treks and Climbs guide](#) and could see the possibility of a guidebook to treks and climbs in Jordan. However, Nasri Atallah, our Tourism Ministry contact had retired and we needed assistance if we were to cover the whole country. So with help from a Jordanian friend, Sami Sabat, we contacted Queen Noor.

She had already created a Foundation to aid the economy of Jordan's rural communities and realised immediately the potential benefits that trekkers could bring to villages. She provided us with a car and driver who met us early each day to take us to the start of each proposed trek, and picked us up as arranged at the end. Initially he couldn't understand what we were doing, inevitably asking, "Why walk, I can drive you there?", but he soon understood and became enthusiastic.

With a letter of introduction from Queen Noor we also got permission to explore Petra for new trails finding numerous ways in at a time when the famous canyon of The Siq, that unique entrance to the old city, was reputed to be the only one. Amongst these routes we were particularly pleased by the discovery of an ancient Nabataean way from the canyon of Little Petra directly to Petra's mountain top Monastery. I say 'discovery', though it was of course well known to the Bedouin. Twenty years on it has become one of the most popular ways into Petra, especially for trekkers.

The idea of a Jordan Trail was born.



On the Jordan Trail, passing through Petra

at the World Travel Mart in London. He and a friend of his, Marwan Tarazi, had just completed a new ten day trail in Palestine to commemorate the millennium by following in the hypothetical footsteps of Mary and Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem. He already knew about us as he had our [Wadi Rum guide](#) and asked us to write a guidebook to their Nativity Trail on behalf of the Palestinian Authority, which we gladly did. Sadly this is now out of print.

Discussing Jordan with him it seemed he was one of the very few people who had done some treks there. He understood the potential of our Jordan Trail project immediately and was keen to help but it wasn't until a few years later that he was able to spend more time with us. In the meanwhile Di and I continued to beaver away opening more trails. With a Bedouin friend from Rum we checked out a route from Aqaba through Rum and across the desert to link with our Petra treks. We also extended our Dana trek north for a day and checked out a potential trail from Greco-Roman Um Qais close to the Syrian border to link with our route to Pella. By the time a revised version of the [Jordan Treks guide](#) was published a few years later, the missing

By the time our [Jordan Treks, Caves, Climbs and Canyons guide](#) was published in 1999, it was obvious that many of the treks could be linked to form a continuous trail down the length of the country. The idea of a Jordan Trail was born. We would have gone back to Queen Noor to see if she could continue her sponsorship but tragically her husband King Hussein had just died and she was no longer in a position to help. Her successor, Queen Rania, wife of King Abdullah, was too busy with her own new projects. So our plans were stalled but fortuitously we then met Mark Khano

links in our Jordan Trail dream were getting fewer.



Exploring the forests of Al Ayoun with Eisa Dweikat

When Mark was able to join us some of the time with his four wheel drive to roam the country, things finally started coming together. Maps continued to be extremely difficult to get and ours from Queen Noor were now well out of date due to Jordan's rapid urban growth and increasing road network. We quickly discovered the value of Google Earth! We were also lucky to be requested by the rural community of Al Ayoun in north Jordan to create more trails in their area.



First view of the amazing Bedouin route down into the Mujib Gorge

Daniel Adamson from the Abraham Path Initiative had recently done a village to village trail for them and the local community were keen to take the idea further with support from USAID. It's a beautiful area which we had somehow missed, but as in Rum we hit the jackpot. Over a couple of seasons we not only found numerous excellent one day treks but some good cliffs and even caves. Enough for an [Al Ayoun guidebook](#). One of the routes provided a great three day alternative to our original Ajloun to Pella trek. The Jordan Trail was inexorably coming together.

Inspirational guidebooks...

By 2010 Mark was able to spend even more time with us and numerous young Jordanians (everyone is young when you are seventy!) were also getting out on the hills having been inspired, so they said, by our guidebooks. Jordan's adventure tourism, previously neglected, was growing. The Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature had started *Wild Jordan*, their trekking company. Rakan Meyer had formed a trekking and canyoning company called *Terhaal*. Hakim Tamimi started *Tropical Deserts* and kindly said "It was your guidebooks that gave us the love of our country". He and his friend Murad Arslan, a trekking guide, were soon adding to the Jordan Trail with weekly walks. The idea was rapidly catching on. Mark too formed his own company, *Experience Jordan*, and together with him and two other friends, Amjad Shahrour and Osama Cori of *Explore Jordan* we followed partially in Hakim's footsteps from the north to the Dead Sea, sometimes finding alternative ways.



Mark Khano crossing the Mujib Gorge

We had some amazing days – first on an almost lost Roman road then with Abu Saif, a local Beni Hamida Bedouin, finding a superb route across the three great canyons of Zerqa Main, Hidan and Mujib. Hakim and Murad's trail then took us to the mighty Crusader castle of Kerak before we continued into new terrain past the ancient village of Ainun. To our surprise we then not only found a perfect way across the thousand metre deep Hasa Gorge, but also a long and unclimbed limestone cliff.

The Trail includes “one of the world’s top ten treks”



Beyond, we passed through the ancient but recently renovated village of Ma'tan, now a tourist lodge thanks to the efforts of Abu ????. With his help, we picked up our old trail from there to Dana and improved on it. The rest of the way was now known and included a five day Dana to Petra trek classed by Geographical magazine as “in the world’s top ten treks”, then on to Roman Humeima and Rum, now a World Heritage Site. Mahmoud Bdul, a Bedouin guide from Petra showed us a much better way there which included the wild Mas'uda Mountains and the magnificent canyon of Wadi Aheimar.

We also improved on the existing trail from Rum to Aqaba, eventually finding a way over the jagged Aqaba Mountains to the Red Sea rather than finishing with two days on tracks and roads.

Left: The incredible canyon of Wadi Aheimar

Below: First view of the Red Sea from the Aqaba Mountains



The Jordan Trail is born



In spring 2016 the Jordan Trail Association was formed and the trail finally received the long overdue approval of the Tourism Ministry enabling USAID to provide funding for waymarking its 640 kilometres, developing home stays along the way, training local guides and providing a website and other informative and promotional literature. Watching 'Lawrence of Arabia' had not only kept us busy with exploration for thirty two years but along the way we had made some wonderful friends. Jordan is renowned for its hospitality – you really should try it.

Mark Khano, Tony Howard, Di Taylor, Amjad Shahrour and Osama Cori reach the end of the trail at the Red Sea

Our explorations were rewarded by an invitation to visit H M Queen Noor...

We received a surprise invite to visit HM Queen Noor who thanked us for our involvement in the creation and development of Jordan's adventure tourism and the Jordan Trail. However, we were pleased to point out that, were it not for her much appreciated and essential help, our guidebooks to trekking in Jordan could never have been written and, as a Jordanian friend subsequently told us, it was through those books that they "discovered the beauty of their country's wild places and the many adventures they offer". They soon joined us on our explorations, forming the Jordan Trail Association. Without them and their enthusiasm, our hopes of creating a 'Jordan Trail' based on the treks we had discovered during those early years could not have come to fruition. All of which has benefited Jordan's adventure tourism greatly as well as contributing to its promotion and the economic benefit of the rural communities through which the trail passes.

