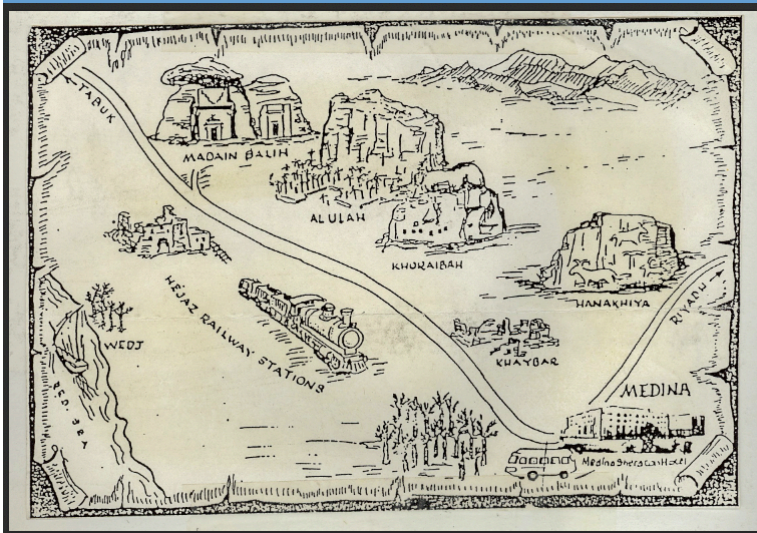


The Nabatean Kingdom



Madain Saleh, KSA
and Petra, Jordan

1989 and 1999



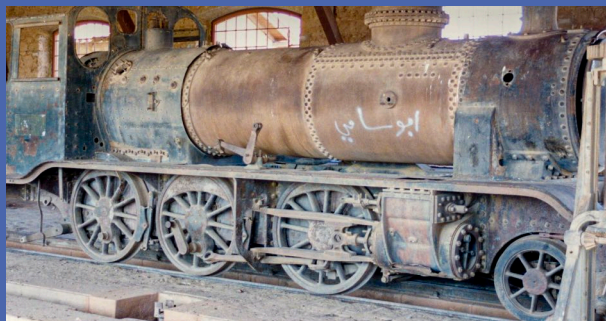
The Nabatean Kingdom

When posted in Jeddah, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia during the Gulf War (1988-1991) working for Tetra Pak, I took the opportunity of visiting some of the ancient sites around the country. Not fully understanding the significance at the time and long before I had a chance to visiting the far better know “sister-site” in Jordan – Petra. Al Hijr (Madain Saleh) is a UNESCO World Heritage site, just like Petra of course.

This Pre-Islamic archeological site dates back to the 1st century and is the second largest and southern most city of the Nabatean Kingdom after Petra. **Having visited both sites, Madain Saleh in 1989 and then Petra ten years later in 1999,** I can truly say Madain Saleh is just as impressive and well preserved.

For historical dates and more in-depth information, I recommend visiting the websites. However, in order to get to the archeological sites in Saudi Arabia, you do need a permit prior to setting off. Needless to say, you first need an invitation (business visa only applicable at the time) to get in to KSA. This might however change in the future.

The road from Jeddah to Madinah is highway and very good. It is the last 3-hour drive which is pretty bad (not to mention the dust and heat). Petra is only some 40 km north of Madain Saleh, however, it is not possible to cross the border from this side into Jordan as a foreigner. **The Hejaz Railway, which is since long closed, was built back in the beginning of the century and can also be seen up here.**

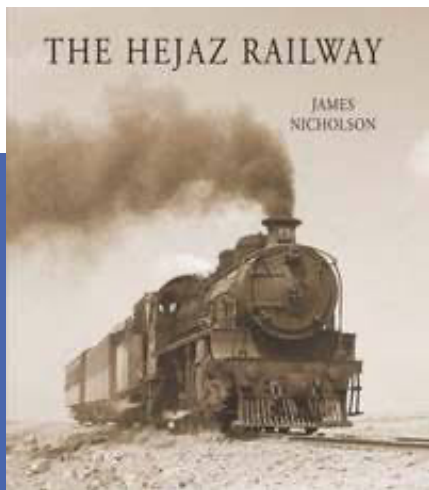


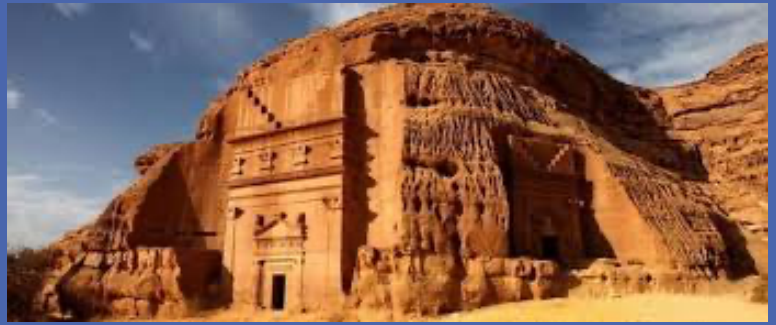
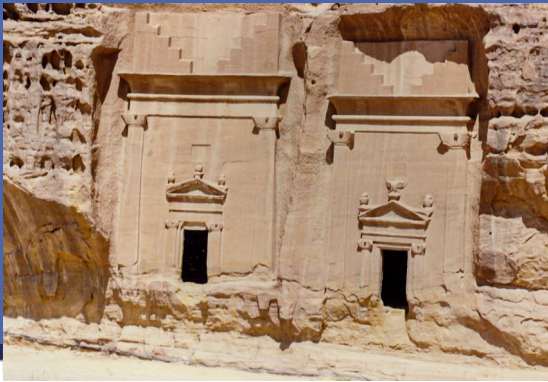
Hejaz Railway

A railway was constructed (1901-08) on the orders of the Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid II. He wanted to connect Damascus, Syria with Jerusalem, Israel in the north-west with Medina and Mecca in Saudi Arabia. This would ease the transporting of pilgrimage journeys as well as politically and economically consolidate the Ottoman administration of the centers of Islamic faith.

A station was built north of Al-Hijr for the maintenance of locomotives, offices and dormitories for railroad staff. The railway also provided greater accessibility to the site – Madain Saleh. However, this was all destroyed in a local revolt during the World War I. Despite all this, several archaeological investigations continued to be carried out at the site during the establishment of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia back in the 1930ies and up to the 1960ies.

The railway station has since been partially restored and now includes 16 buildings in total. Here, some of the old run down locomotives can be seen as well as carriages and parts from the time of the early century.



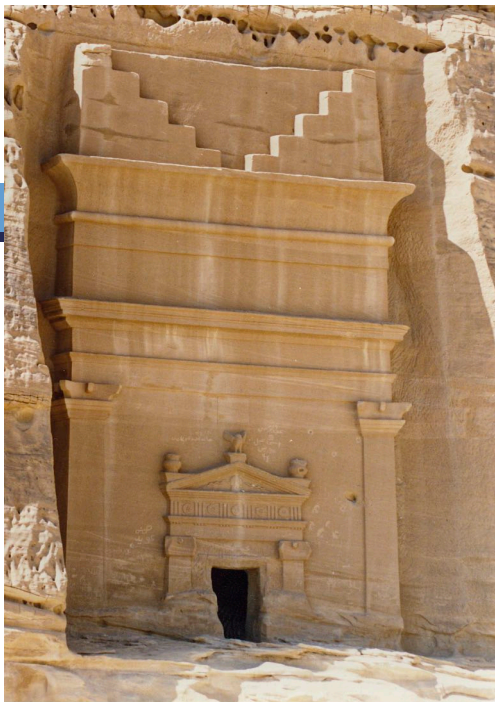
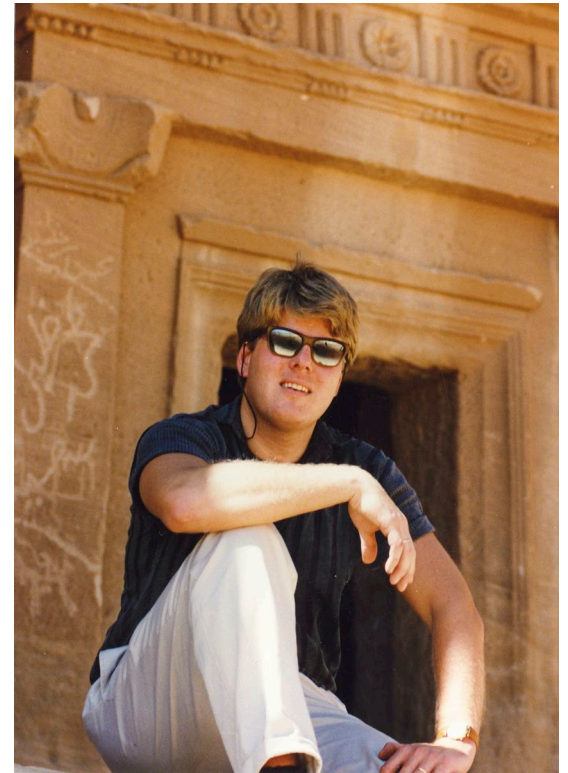


Madain Salah

When we finally arrive at the site, the temperature is around 45 degrees this day. It is difficult to move around in the heat, so we try and sit in the shadows as much as possible and in the tombs themselves. The tombs are nice and cool inside. Most of Madain Salah is still largely unexplored and unexcavated.

Although the site was proclaimed an archaeological treasure as late as in the 1970ies, few excavations has been conducted to date. It is only the visible tombs over ground that's been excavated. It was only as recent as in 2008 that the site was proclaimed a UNESCO World Heritage site. There are recently a few attempts including foreign experts / archaeological staff having been invited to help further date and map out the area for more excavations. This was the first world heritage site in the Kingdom. It was chosen for its well-preserved remains from late antiquity especially the 131 rock-cut monumental tombs with their elaborately ornamented facades of the Nabatean Kingdom.

The Nabataea period is estimated to have been established during the 1st century AD, when it came under the rule of the Nabatean king Aretas IV Philpatris who made Madain Salah the kingdoms second capital after Petra in the North.



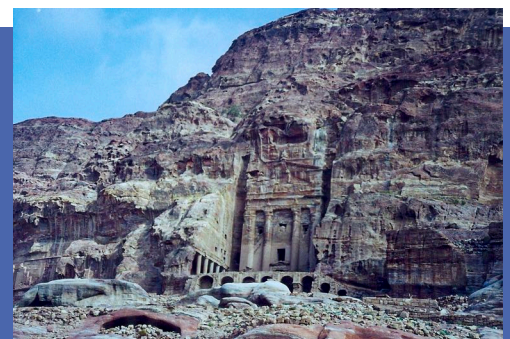
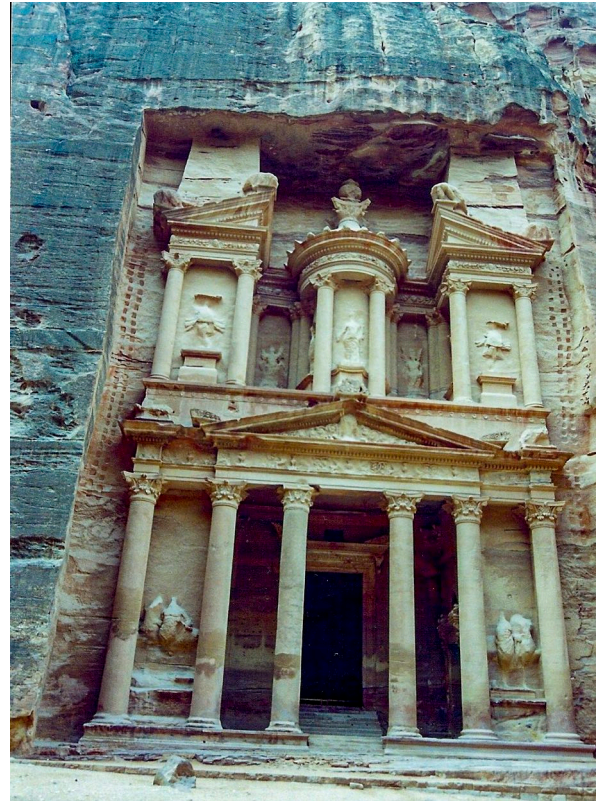


Petra (I)

10 years after my visit to Madain Salah in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, I finally made it to Petra – the ancient capital of the Nabatean Kingdom with a history dating back some 2000 years. My expectations were naturally high from what others have told me. The five hour drive down from Amman went quite smooth on mostly very good roads.

The most surprising insight is the relatively few tourists around. Maybe it was the season. I was impressed of course with what I saw, and the few tourists around only heightened the feeling I suppose. Petra became widely admired for its refined culture, architecture, water channelizing systems and complex dam constructions.

The rose-red city of Petra has been a on my bucket-list for a very long time. I was a good thing I brought comfortable shoes as there is a lot of walking around and also a little bit of hiking if one enjoys this. There are some spectacular settings deep inside a narrow gorge just upon entering. The main stretch is some 1,2 km long and it is also possible to travel by horse or camel if one prefers. There are food-stalls and soft-drinks available along the route. There is a small village/town nearby where one can stay overnight as well.





Petra (II)

The ruins of Wadi Musa (Petra)

Petra was the center from where they controlled and dominated the trading routes of ancient Arabia. They even charged tolls on goods transported through Petra on the caravans bringing frankincense and myrrh from Oman. They also brought spices and silk from India and China as well as African Ivory from where animal hides were brought. At the height of its power, the kingdom stretched from Damascus in the north and included parts of Sinai and the Negev deserts in the south, thereby effectively ruling the greater part of Arabia.

Petra was then lost by the 16th century only to be rediscovered some 300 years later in 1812. The site was then found by a Swiss explorer, persuaded by his Bedouin guide to take him to the site of the rumored lost city and ruins of Wadi Musa (better known today as Petra). Despite the rediscovering, it was not until 1924 that the first archaeological excavations were carried out here by the British. The desert highway from Amman to Petra is the quickest way to travel. However, for a more scenic approach use the Kings highway through Madaba. Petra is about 260 km south of Amman.

Be prepared to negotiate the price of a guide, should you decide to use one for the site.

