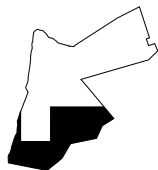


Southern Desert & Aqaba

الصحراء الجنوبية & العقبة



No man can live this life and emerge unchanged. He will carry, however faint, the imprint of the desert, the bind which marks the nomad; and he will have within him the yearning to return, weak or insistent according to his nature. For this cruel land can cast a spell which no temperate climate can match.

TE Lawrence, Seven Pillars of Wisdom

Jordan's far south belongs to the desert and the Bedouin. At the meeting point of the Rift Valley, the Negev Desert, the Sinai peninsula and the Hejaz region of Arabia, it has been criss-crossed for centuries by trade and pilgrimage routes.

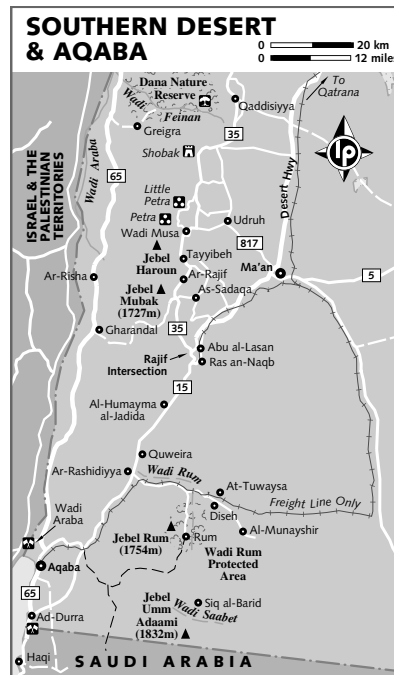
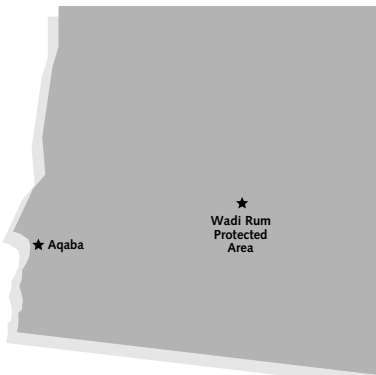
Wadi Rum is where the desert sparkles, opening up an enchanting landscape of red sands and towering sandstone peaks. Lawrence of Arabia fell in love with the place, describing its scenery as 'vast, echoing and God-like'. Today this giant sandpit is an adventure-sports playground, offering excellent hiking, camel riding and rock climbing.

This is the best place to get to know the Bedouin; either chatting over a desert campfire, scrambling up to sandstone bluffs with a Bedouin guide or stopping at a goat-hair tent with your driver for a cup of sweet tea.

Aqaba is the other main stop for visitors, primarily for its excellent diving and snorkelling, though it's gaining ground quickly as a regional winter resort. Aqaba is the gateway to Egypt, via ferry across the Gulf of Aqaba. Israel & the Palestinian Territories is a 10-minute drive away.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Hike, scramble and climb all day in the spectacular desert area of **Wadi Rum** (opposite), then camp out under a stunning blanket of stars
- Make the three-day **Camel Trek** (p210) from Wadi Rum to Aqaba, or save your inner thighs and limit it to a half-day excursion around Rum
- Take a break and enjoy the balmy winter climate, great seafood and idyllic setting of **Aqaba** (p216), Jordan's one and only 'resort'
- It's not the Red Sea but it's damn close, so do some **Diving & Snorkelling** (p227) around the remarkable marine life and coral of the Gulf of Aqaba
- Take a break from your holiday on the private **beaches** (p220) of the Royal Jordan Diving Club or Barracuda Beach



WADI RUM

03
Offering some of the most extraordinary desert scenery you'll ever see, **Wadi Rum** (admission per person JD2, children under 12 free, per vehicle JD5) is a definite highlight of any visit to Jordan. This area, made famous abroad by the exploits of TE Lawrence ('Lawrence of Arabia') in the early 20th century, has lost none of its allure and forbidding majesty. Its myriad moods and dramatic colours, dictated by the changing angle of the sun, best reward an overnight trip so, unless you're really pushed for time, linger here for a day or two, slowing down to the timeless rhythm of desert life, enjoying the galaxy of stars overhead at night and the spectacular sunrises and sunsets. Like most deserts, Wadi Rum is as much to be experienced as it is to be seen.

The jebels of Wadi Rum completely dominate the small village of Rum, which has a few concrete houses, a school, some shops and the 'Beau Geste'-style fort, headquarters of the much-photographed Desert Patrol Corps.

وادي رم

The region known as Wadi Rum is actually a series of valleys about 2km wide stretching north to south for about 130km. Among the valleys is a desert landscape of sand and rocks, punctuated by towering jebels that have eroded into a soft sandstone over a period of up to 50 million years. The valley floors are about 900m above sea level. The epic Jebel Rum (1754m) dominates the central valley and for a long time was considered the highest peak in Jordan; that accolade now goes to Jebel Umm Adaami (1832m), to the south on the Saudi border.

Although conveniently and collectively known as 'Bedouin', the major tribe of Wadi Rum is the Huweitat, who claim to be descendants of the Prophet Mohammed. Villagers and nomads throughout the Wadi Rum area number about 5000. The local Bedouin are proud but very hospitable, particularly once you get out into the desert, away from the competitive environment of the visitor centre and Rum village.

The best months to visit are early spring (March and April) and late autumn (October to November). In winter (December to February) it can rain, and snow on the mountains is not uncommon. In the hot season (May to September) daytime temperatures often soar past 40°C. Throughout the year (including summer), however, night-time temperatures can fall to 0°C, so come prepared if you're camping or watching the sunset.

Wadi Rum was for a while under the management of the Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature (RSCN), who established the Wadi Rum Protected Area in 1988. The area is now controlled by Aqaba Special Economic Zone Authority (ASEZA) but the idea is the same – to promote tourism in balance with the imperative to protect fragile ecosystems. As a result, admission to Wadi Rum is strictly controlled and all vehicles, camels and guides within Wadi Rum must be arranged either through, or with the approval of, the visitor centre.

There is talk of significantly raising the admission fee to around JD7 or JD8 in the future, though no decisions had been made on this at the time of going to print.

History

Wadi Rum was first possibly mentioned in Ptolemy's *Geography* as 'Aramaua', and,

LAWRENCE OF ARABIA

Born in 1888 into a wealthy English family, Thomas Edward Lawrence ('TE' to his friends) studied archaeology, which led him to explore several Crusader castles in Syria, Lebanon and Jordan in 1909 for his thesis. He returned to the Syrian-Turkish border for excavations between 1910 and 1914. With the outbreak of WWI, Lawrence became an intelligence agent in Cairo. Supporting the cause of the Arab Revolt and manifesting his own deep hostility towards French politics in Syria, Colonel Lawrence favoured the creation of a Sunni and Arab state.

But it was the desert revolt of 1917 that stirred the Western imagination and etched his name into legend. At the side of Emir Faisal and with the support of General Allenby, Lawrence and the Arab warriors conquered Aqaba. He entered Damascus in triumph, marking the final defeat of the Ottoman Turks. Syria then became a joint Arab-French state, although not the independent one many Arabs had fought for (and been promised).

He has been widely credited in the West as the reason for this important victory over the Turks, often to the chagrin of Arabs, whose soldiers numbered around 100,000, of whom 10,000 were killed. By all accounts Lawrence, never the most humble of men, did little to alter the perception that he was the figure most responsible for victory. In Lawrence's own words: 'On the whole I prefer lies to truth, particularly when they concern me'.

Returning to England, Lawrence defended his ideas at the Paris Peace Conference and served as the special interpreter of the Hashemites. It was at this time that he started his principal work, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, which recounts his adventures. He apparently wrote it twice, because he left the first manuscript in a train station in London! *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* is still suggested reading for British military personnel serving in Iraq.

In 1921, Lawrence was sent to Trans-Jordan to help Emir Abdullah formulate the foundations of the new state. He later left this position and enrolled in 1922 with the Royal Air Force (RAF), under an assumed name, first as a pilot, and then as a simple mechanic.

In 1927 he left on a mission to India but returned home because of rumours that he had encouraged an uprising of Afghan tribes. He left the RAF in February 1935 and died three months later after a motorcycle accident.

For online information on Lawrence check out www.lawrenceofarabia.com, www.telsociety.org and www.telstudies.org.

according to some Islamic scholars, is mentioned in the Quran as 'Ad'. Excavations have confirmed that the area was inhabited between 800 and 600 BC, when it was known as Iram, and was popular with travellers because of the abundance of springs and wild game. By about the 4th century BC Wadi Rum was settled by the Nabataeans, who built temples and left behind inscriptions on the rocks – many of which can still be seen.

The region is probably more famous because the indefatigable TE Lawrence (see above) stayed here in 1917. The serendipitous discovery of a Nabataean temple (behind the Rest House) in 1933 returned the spotlight to the desert but the temple was not completely excavated until 1997, by a team of French archaeologists.

Wildlife

Despite its barren appearance, Wadi Rum is home to a complex ecological system.

Dotted among the desert are small plants that are used by the Bedouin for medicinal purposes, and during the infrequent rains parts of the desert can turn into a colourful sea of purple and blue flowers.

With the extreme heat and lack of water, not many species of animal exist, and sensibly most only venture out at night. If you're really lucky, you may see jackals, wolves, wild goats, the strictly nocturnal Arabian sand cats, and the highly endangered Arabian oryx, a small group of which were released into Wadi Rum in 2002 (see p132). A few birds of prey, such as vultures and eagles, can also be found. And watch out for scorpions, snakes and the scary (but largely harmless) camel spiders.

Orientation

Whether you come by minibus or taxi you'll first arrive at the Wadi Rum visitor centre (around 7km before Rum village),

where you'll pay the reserve entry fee. Most people then arrange a 4WD trip at the visitor centre and there are normally dozens of 4WDs waiting for customers. If you want to do your own hiking/climbing etc it is possible to continue to Rum village by jumping quickly back on the bus or hitching the remaining 7km to the village.

BOOKS & MAPS

If you plan to do any short hikes and scrambles, bring a detailed guidebook and map; if you intend to do some serious hiking and rock climbing, it's vital to organise a guide in advance.

The British climber Tony Howard has spent a lot of time exploring Wadi Rum, and has co-written (with Di Taylor) the excellent and detailed *Treks & Climbs in Wadi Rum*. The condensed, pocket-sized and more affordable (JD3 to JD5) version of this is called *Walks & Scrambles in Rum*. Treks and climbs around Wadi Rum are also mentioned in Howard and Taylor's *Walking in Jordan*. Get these books before arriving in Wadi Rum, though if you are lucky you might find something at the Peace Bazar Bookshop a couple of hundred metres south of the Rest House in Rum village.

The colourful Wadi Rum brochure has a map showing the major sites – get one free at the visitor centre. The 1997 *Map of Rum* is contoured and detailed for a small section

of northern Wadi Rum (ie around Rum village). The most detailed and informative map is *Wadi Rum Tourist Plan*, published by International Traditional Services Corp, but it's not widely available in Jordan.

Information

Essential items to bring along include a hat (or Bedouin headgear), sunscreen, sturdy footwear and plenty of water. If you're camping anywhere, including the Rest House, bring a torch (flashlight), a book to read and a padlock (many tents are lockable).

The Bedouin are a conservative people, so please dress appropriately. Loose shorts and tops for men and women are OK around the Rest House, but baggy trousers/skirts and modest shirts/blouses will, besides preventing serious sunburn, earn you more respect from the Bedouin, especially out in the desert.

EMERGENCY

Police station (☎ 2017050) Located in the old police fort 400m south of the Rest House. Will not receive complaints (go to the tourist police), but they will come looking for you if you get lost.

Tourist police (☎ 2018215) At the visitor centre.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Visitor Centre (☎ /fax 2090600; rum@nets.com.jo) Inconveniently situated at the entry to the protected area, about 7km north of Rum village.

WADI RUM PROTECTED AREA

In keeping with their efforts to preserve the fragile local environment, the authorities require those making excursions into Wadi Rum to follow a few simple rules, regardless of whether you're in a 4WD, astride a camel or hiking.

- Hunting is prohibited, as is the collection of any animals, flowers, herbs, rocks, fossils or archaeological artefacts
- No camping or climbing is allowed except in official sites set up for this purpose
- Do not damage any trees or graffiti any rocks
- Do not collect firewood or make fires; apart from damaging trees and shrubs, it may also damage the habitat for local animals
- No littering
- Respect the customs and lifestyle of local people and always ask before you take photos

While many of these rules may seem obvious, the scourge of graffiti and cigarette butts (especially at the sunset sites), as well as damage to rock art and safety bolts left on the jebels by climbers, remain as testament to the short-sightedness of some tourists. As the RSCN motto says: 'Leave nothing but footprints, take nothing but memories'.

On a small hill located about 400m behind (southwest of) the Rest House (follow the telephone poles) are the limited ruins of a 2000-year old **Nabataean temple**, dedicated to the deity Allat. An interesting explanation (in English and French) of the temple and its excavation is on a wall inside the Rest House. Near the temple are some **inscriptions** by hunters and nomads dating back to the 2nd century BC.

Back in Rum village a new complex near the police station is rumoured to be a new museum of some kind.

About 3km south of the Rest House is **Lawrence's Spring** (Abu Aineh), named after TE Lawrence, who wrote about it in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. It's fairly unimpressive compared to the other sights of Wadi Rum. Head south from the Rest House and follow the eastern side of Jebel Rum for 3km. From the obvious water tank at ground level, a 20-minute scramble up some rocks (follow the line of green shrubs) brings you to a small pleasant pool with fine **views** to Jebel Khazali and beyond.

Long Excursions

Most of the major attractions, most dramatic landscapes and better rock formations are further away from Rum village.

The following major sites are the ones featured in the jeep itineraries offered at the visitor centre. The walking, driving or riding distance from the Rest House in Rum village is included in brackets.

Barrah Canyon (14km) This 5km-long valley is worth exploring on foot or on camel.

Burdah Rock Bridge (19km) This is a narrow piece of rock precariously perched about 80m above surrounding rock. It can be reached (up the western side) without gear by anyone in decent shape. See Scrambling p211.

Jebel Faishiyya/Anfaishiyya Rock Art (10km) Some of the best Nabataean and Thamudic inscriptions in Wadi Rum.

Jebel Khazali (7km) The narrow *siq* and rock inscriptions here can be explored on foot for about 150m; beyond this you need ropes and a guide.

Lawrence's House (Al-Qsair) (9km) This is little more than a heap of bricks, apparently once part of a house occupied by Lawrence, and built on the foundations of a Nabataean temple. The remote location and supreme views of the red sands are the main attraction.

Red Sand Dunes (6km) While there are sand dunes in several places around Wadi Rum, this section to which most groups are taken has a small section of beautiful red sand up the slope of Jebel Umm Ulaydiyya.

Seven Pillars of Wisdom (8km) Named after Lawrence's book, this large rock formation is easy to see from the visitor centre.

Sunset & Sunrise (11km) Dusk and dawn are the magical (and cooler) times to be in the desert. The best vantage points differ according to the time of year; the most common is Umm Sabatah. Jeep drivers can take you there and either wait or pick you up later (they are reliable about such things); or arrange a sunset tour which includes a traditional Bedouin dinner for a negotiable price.

Umm Fruth Rock Bridge (13km) This is another small and remote rock bridge that can easily be climbed without gear or a guide. It can be a busy spot at lunchtime.

Wadak Rock Bridge (Rakahbt al-Wadak) (9km) This rock formation, the 'Little Rock Bridge', is easier to climb and more accessible than Burdah Rock Bridge, but is not as impressive. The views across the valley are superb.

Beyond Wadi Rum

Rum's fantastic scenery continues well beyond the confines of the protected area. Wadi Rum Mountain Guides in particular offers trips to beautiful areas in the south of Rum, including Jebel Khasch, Wadi Noghra, Wadi Saabet and 'No-Man's Land', near the Saudi border. This area is best suited to a multi-day camping trip. See their website www.bedouinroads.com for trip ideas.

One great 4WD/hiking combo is to hike up **Jebel Umm Adaami** (1832m), Jordan's highest peak, on the rarely visited southern border with Saudi Arabia. The hour-long uphill hike is marked by cairns and offers fabulous views of Wadi Rum to the north and Saudi Arabia to the south. Find a driver who knows the 45-minute jeep route south to Wadi Saabet, where the hike starts. On the way back stop off at the rock carvings of nearby Siq al-Barid, a lovely spot for a picnic.

Trips out to the remote south are understandably more expensive than to central Wadi Rum.

4WD TRIPS

Rates for 4WD excursions are fixed and listed in the boxed text (opposite). Arranging a trip at the visitor centre is generally hassle free. The tricky thing is finding other travellers who want to do the same trip in order to share costs. The easiest thing is to put together a group in Wadi Musa before taking the bus together to Wadi Rum.

You can opt to visit any combination of sights, especially if you pay for the vehicle for the day. Make sure you discuss your

4WD EXCURSIONS IN WADI RUM

The following prices are per jeep, not per person.

Wadi Rum operators

sites	km	time (hr)	price (JD) per vehicle
Lawrence's Spring	14	1	15
Jebel Khazali (via Lawrence's Spring)	20	2	20
Sunset sites (via Lawrence's Spring & Jebel Khazali)	35	2½	35
Sand dunes (via Lawrence's Spring & Jebel Khazali)	40	3	40
Umm Fruth Rock Bridge (via Lawrence's Spring & Jebel Khazali, Lawrence's House, Anfaishiyya inscriptions and sand dunes)	50	4	40
Burdah Rock Bridge (via Lawrence's Spring, Jebel Khazali, Umm Fruth Rock Bridge, Lawrence's House, Anfaishiyya inscriptions, sand dunes and sunset spot)	60	5	45
Barrah Siq (via Lawrence's Spring, Jebel Khazali, Umm Fruth Rock Bridge and sunset spot)	65	8	50
Day hire	-	8	50
Day vehicle for luggage	-	-	35

Diseh operators

sites	km	time (hr)	price (JD) per vehicle
Alameleh inscriptions	15	1	15
Siq Umm Tawaqi (via al-Hsani sand dune, Alameleh inscriptions, Lawrence Carving)	18	2	20
Sunset sites (via al-Hsani sand dune, Alameleh inscriptions, Siq Umm Tawaqi)	20	2½	25
Burrah Canyon (Alameleh inscriptions, Umm Ishrin, Lawrence's House, Siq Umm Tawaqi)	40	3	30
Burdah Rock Bridge (via al-Hsani sand dune, Alameleh inscriptions, Umm al-Ishrin, Lawrence's House, Umm Fruth Bridge, Siq Umm Tawaqi)	60	8	50
Day hire	-	8	50

itinerary with the driver and at the visitor centre before you set out, and if you have any complaints of this kind, make sure you report them to the visitor centre when you return to Rum. Most jeeps seat six people and some of the older ones are pick-ups with bench seats in the back (these actually offer better views than the closed-in cabs).

You may be approached by the odd freelance guide in Rum village. Prices may be cheaper (and very negotiable) but there are fewer guarantees to the quality of the trip.

It's important to realise that the maximum times listed are exaggerated and your journey time may be significantly less. On the negative side of things, refunds for excursions shorter than you expected are not possible. On the positive side, Wadi Rum is best enjoyed if you slow down to the pace of the desert and don't race around in a mad rush. Take your time at each site as you'll still have time to complete the itinerary if you linger for a while to admire the view and soak up the silence.

You can easily add on an overnight stay at a Bedouin camp. Your driver will simply drop you off in the afternoon and pick you up the next morning.

CAMELS

If you have the time, travelling around Wadi Rum by camel is highly recommended. Apart from being ecologically sound, it will enable you to experience Wadi Rum as the Bedouin have for centuries and to really appreciate the silent gravitas of the desert. That said, a ride of more than about four hours will leave you sore in places you never even knew existed.

The official rates per person per camel are listed in the boxed text (below). Note that if you take a camel overnight, you will need to negotiate an additional price for food, tents and so on (see p207). You'll enjoy your ride much more if you ride yourself rather than being led. This will cost a bit more as you need to pay for your guide's camel but it's well worth the extra cost.

It is also possible to arrange longer camel excursions from Wadi Rum to Aqaba (three to six nights depending on the route) via the misnamed Lawrence's Rd (he actually took a different route via Wadi Itm); or to near Wadi Musa (for Petra; about five nights). In addition to the usual JD20 per camel per day rate, you'll need to factor in the necessary provisions, tents (if required) and returning the camels back to Rum.

Sunset Camp (p213) offers a two-day trip to Aqaba for around JD75 per person. The last part of the trip to Aqaba is generally done by taxi.

If you ask around you might be able to attend one of the camel races held weekly in winter, generally on a Friday.

HORSE TREKKING

An alternative and memorable mode of four-legged transport through Wadi Rum and surrounding areas is by horse. Expect to pay around JD50 per day. These trips are really for people who have some experience of riding. Among the agencies or guides who can organise such an expedition is **Rum Horses** (☎ 2033508, 077 7471960; www.desertguides.com), a professional French-run trekking, camel and horse trekking agency located on the south side of the road 6km before the turn to Wadi Rum.

HIKING

There are several great hiking routes in Rum, but avoid the extreme heat of summer (May to September). Remember that it's very easy to get disoriented amid the dozens of craggy peaks; temperatures can be extreme; natural water supplies are not common and sometimes undrinkable; passing traffic is rare; and maps are often inaccurate. Walking in sand is particularly exhausting.

The books by Tony Howard and Di Taylor (p205) list a number of hikes in the region.

One excellent do-it-yourself option is to hike southeast across the plain from the visitor centre towards the Seven Pillars of Wisdom and then head up **Makharas Canyon** (take the left-hand wadi when it branches). The wadi narrows after about an hour from the visitor centre and then pops out onto a patch of gorgeous red sand with fabulous views of Jebel Barrah and Umm Nfoos to the east. From here cut north over the sand dunes and plod your way around the northern tip of Jebel Umm Ishrin until you get back to the Seven Pillars of Wisdom. This hike takes about 2½ hours.

You could extend this hike by continuing across the valley on foot or camel to the Alameleh inscriptions, or head even further via the Siq Umm Tawaqi valley (and the carving of Lawrence's head) all the way to Diseh. You'd need a tent, food, plenty of water and a guide for this adventurous overnight option.

Another possible DIY hike is the circumambulation of the southern half of **Jebel Rum** via Wadi Leyyah (eight hours). One great 4WD/hiking combo is to hike up **Jebel Umm Adaami** (see p208).

SCRAMBLING

Scrambling lies somewhere between hiking and climbing. No technical skills are required but you may have to pull yourself up short rock faces at places on the following trips.

If you take a 4WD excursion to **Burdah Rock Bridge**, it's well worth making the hour-long scramble up to the bridge itself. There's nothing technical here but you'll need a guide to find the route up and will need a head for heights on one spot just before the bridge. There are fabulous views from the route up and from the top of the bridge. To continue beyond the bridge you'll need ropes and some climbing skills (one climber fell to his death here in 1999).

With a local guide or a copy of Tony Howard's *Walking in Jordan* you can navigate the labyrinthine *siqs* of **Rakhabat Canyon** for an exciting half-day trip through the heart of Jebel Umm al-Ishrin. The western mouth of the canyon is just by Rum village, but don't confuse it with the more obvious Makhman Canyon to the north. At the far (eastern) end of the canyon you can hike across the valley to the Anfaishiyah inscrip-

tions, 600m south of the Bedouin camp, and then return on foot to Rum via the southern point of Jebel Umm al-Ishrin, with a possible detour to Lawrence's Spring en route. Alternatively, with a guide and some experience of abseiling you can head back west through the mountain ridge along the Kharazeh Canyon for a great loop route.

Another place that offers great scrambling is Jebel Khazali.

ROCK CLIMBING

Wadi Rum offers some challenging rock climbing, equal to if not better than anything in Europe. There's a vast array of climbs right up to French 8 grade.

While rock climbing is still a nascent industry in Wadi Rum and you'll need to bring your own gear, the situation has improved in recent years. There are at least six accredited climbing guides (contactable through the visitor centre), most of whom have been trained in the UK. When arranging a climbing trip, contact a guide at least a few days in advance so that camp equipment and transport can also be organised and prices negotiated. Expect to pay a minimum of JD110 for one to two days' climbing – it may sound expensive but it's not when compared to Europe, and few climbers leave disappointed.

One of the more popular climbs for amateur climbers is up Jebel Rum, because minimal gear is needed and it's close to the Rest House, although a guide is still required to find the best route and to help with the climb. Another popular climbing location is Jebel Barrah.

For information on routes see Tony Howard and Di Taylor's books (p205) and check out the website www.wadirum.net.

OTHER ACTIVITIES

The **Royal Aero Sports Club of Jordan** (Aqaba ☎ 03 2033763, Amman ☎ 06 4873261; www.fly.to/rpacj/) offers hot air ballooning over Wadi Rum for around JD135 per person (minimum four people), as well as microlighting (JD90 per hour) and even sky diving (JD145). Contact **Bait Ali** (☎ 2022626, 079 5548133; www.desertexplorer.net) for details of this and other activities such as sand yachting. Bait Ali also rents out mountain bikes, along with maps of possible routes in the dry mud flats north of the camp.

CAMEL TREKS IN WADI RUM

sites	km	time (hr)	maximum price (JD)
Nabataean Temple	1	½	2
Alameleh Inscriptions	6	2	7
Lawrence's Spring	6	2	7
Sunset Sites (via Alameleh Inscriptions, Siq Umm Tawaqi)	8	1½	10
Jebel Khazali (via Lawrence's Spring)	14	4	16
Sunset sites (via Lawrence's Spring & Jebel Khazali)	22	overnight	40
Sand dunes (via Lawrence's Spring, Jebel Khazali & Lawrence's House)	25	5	20
Burdah Rock Bridge (via Lawrence's Spring, Jebel Khazali & Umm Fruth Rock Bridge)	40	overnight	40
Day Hire	unlimited	8	20
Day Camel for luggage	unlimited	8	20

The annual **Jebel Ishrin Marathon** (www.whmf.org in German) takes place each September.

Sleeping

Thankfully there is still no hotel anywhere in Wadi Rum, and most of those who stay overnight understandably prefer to sleep out in the desert. Most visitors come as day trippers, so finding a place to enjoy the solitude is easier than it seems.

RUM VILLAGE

The frayed tents out the back of the **Rest House** (☎ 2018867; mattress in two-person tent per person JD3) are pretty much the only option in Rum, but they're only recommended if you arrive in Wadi Rum too late to head

into the desert. Some of the mattresses are very thin. You can also pitch your own tent out the back (JD1). You do get access to the toilets and shower block. The site has little security so keep your valuables with you.

It may be possible to find a bed with a family in Rum village. The owner of the Sunset Camp plans to open a **guest house** (half board per person JD10) in Rum village behind his shop and near the telecom tower (500m south of the medical centre).

IN THE DESERT

Experiencing the legendary hospitality of the Bedouins and sleeping out under the stars are among the primary reasons for heading out into the desert. Camping is

THE BEDOUIN

All over the east and south of the country, you'll see the black goat-hair tents (*beit ash-sha'ar* – literally 'house of hair') of the Bedouin. The *bedu* (the name means 'nomadic') number several hundred thousand, but few can still be regarded as truly nomadic these days. Most have been crowded out from traditional lands by ever-expanding populations and ill-conceived government resettlement programs. Some have opted for city life, but most have, voluntarily or otherwise, settled down to cultivate crops.

A few retain the old ways – it is estimated that around 40 families still live a nomadic or semi-nomadic existence in the Wadi Rum area. They camp for a few months at a time in one spot and graze their herds of goats, sheep or camels. When the sparse fodder runs out, it's time to move on again, which also allows the land to regenerate.

The Bedouin family is a close-knit unit. The women do most of the domestic work, including fetching water, baking bread and weaving clothes. The men are traditionally providers and warriors, though the intertribal raids that for centuries were the staple of everyday Bedouin life are now reserved for the tales of valour told around the campfire at night.

Tents and houses are generally divided into a women's (haram – forbidden area, from where we get the word 'harem') and men's (*raba'a* or *el shigg*) section, which is where guests are treated to tea and discuss the day's events. Most of the family's belongings and stores are kept in the haram (strangers are not permitted inside).

Most of the Bedouin still living in the desert continue to wear the traditional Bedouin robe known as a *thop*, as well as a dagger – symbol of a man's dignity. The women tend to dress in more colourful garb and rarely veil their tattooed faces (the tattoos take the shape of simple auspicious symbols used to guard against the evil eye).

Although camels, once the Bedouin's best friend, are still in evidence, they are now often replaced by the Landrover or Toyota pick-up – Wilfred Thesiger would definitely not approve! Other concessions to modernity are radios (sometimes even TVs), plastic water containers and, occasionally, kerosene stoves.

The Bedouin are renowned for their hospitality and it is part of their creed that no traveller is turned away. This is part of a desert code of survival. Once taken in, a guest will be offered the best of the available food and plenty of tea and coffee. The thinking is simple: today you are passing through and they have something to offer; tomorrow they may be passing your camp and you may have food and drink – which you would offer them before having any yourself. Such a code of conduct made it possible for travellers to cross the desert with some chance of survival in such a hostile environment. How long this code can survive in an era of mass tourism remains one of the Bedouin's greatest challenges.

permitted only in certain designated areas (these are marked on the Wadi Rum map). If you want to sleep out in the open air, remember that it can get very cold at night. The permanent camp sites marked on the map are run by Bedouin companies and are set up year round; the temporary camp sites are only used occasionally, either by Bedouin groups or tourists.

Sunset Camp (☎/fax 2032961, 077 7314688; www.mohammedwadirum.8m.com) is out in the desert near Umm Sabatah and has been recommended. A half-/full-day jeep excursion, accommodation and food at the camp and a lift back to Rum village the next morning costs from around JD20 to JD27 per person, dependent on the size of the group. The owner also runs various 4WD and camel treks. It's best to contact the camp in advance.

Most of the operators run their own camps scattered around the desert – see p207.

AROUND WADI RUM

Bait Ali (☎ 2022626, 079 5548133; www.desertexplorer.net; tent/chalet JD12/15) Located 15km from Rum, near Shakariya village, this well-run camp is situated north of the railway line, just west of the turn-off south to Rum village. Rates include breakfast; add JD7.500 for half board. The accommodation is basic but clean – what you are really paying for is the atmosphere and facilities, including an excellent restaurant (nightly barbecues), a bar and comfortable, cushion-filled Bedouin tents that add an exotic Arabian Nights feel. A new splash pool is planned. It's a good base for mountain biking (JD5 per hour, with free route map) and other desert adventures. The camp is 15km from the Desert Highway junction, 9km from the Wadi Rum visitor centre. You can pitch your own tent (JD3) or park a camper van (JD6) and use the clean shower block. Contact Susie.

Eating

Rest House (☎/fax 2018867; mains JD3.600, breakfast JD3, dinner buffet JD6; ☎ 7am-9pm) A filling meal of kebabs or *shish tawoog*, French fries, and salads and dips is a good deal here, or there are sometimes buffets. Sipping a large Amstel beer (JD2.500) here while watching the sun's rays light up Jebel Umm al-Ishrin is the perfect way to finish off a tough day.

Restaurant Wadi Petra (breakfast JD1.500, dinner or lunch JD3; ☎ 6.30am-11pm) This is a similar

choice, outside and visible from the Rest House.

Redwan Paradise (☎ 6am-1am) Along the main road of Rum Village, this cheap and local place serves tea, hummus and felafel for around JD1 and is a favourite place for the younger Bedouin guides to unwind.

Rum Gate Restaurant (☎ 2015995; Wadi Rum Visitor Centre; buffet JD7, sandwich JD3.500) Inconveniently situated in the visitor centre but a decent choice for groups or those with their own transport.

The small grocery stores along the main road through Rum village have mineral water and good supplies, though you'll have greater variety of imported goods if you stock up elsewhere en route to Wadi Rum. The area around Diseh has some of the cleanest aquifer water in Jordan so it's generally not a problem drinking spring water in Wadi Rum.

While out in the desert you may be lucky enough to try a Bedouin barbecue, cooked in an oven buried in the sand known as a *zerb* (see p56).

Shopping

Rum Arts (☎ 2032918; ☎ 8am-5pm) at the visitor centre is worth a look for silver items, embroidered bags and glass designs. Most items are made by local women to whom most of the profits are returned. It's possible to visit the workshop in Rum village if you are interested (closed Friday and Saturday) – ask for directions here or at the Rest House.

Getting There & Away

Public transport is limited because Rum village has a small population and many visitors come on tours organised by agencies or hotels from Wadi Musa or Aqaba. Public transport stops briefly at the visitor centre before continuing to Rum village.

There is talk of starting up a passenger train between Rum and Aqaba along the existing goods line, but don't hold your breath on this one.

HITCHING

Because of the limited public transport to and from Rum village, many travellers (including locals) are forced to hitch – a normal form of transport in this part of Jordan.

The well-signposted turn-off to Wadi Rum is along the Desert Highway at Ar-Rashidiyya, 5km south of Quweira. From Aqaba, take any minibus heading along the highway (but not a JETT bus which won't stop here) and get out at the turn-off (600 fils); from Wadi Musa or other towns to the north, anything headed towards Aqaba will pass the Rum turn-off. From the crossroads you should be able to find a minibus headed your way for JD1 per person; otherwise hitch and negotiate a fare for the 30km ride.

Alternatively, if you have prearranged your excursion through Wadi Rum with a guide, he may come out to pick you up.

You can normally hitch a lift in a pick-up between Rum village and the visitor centre for around JD1.

MINIBUS

At time of research, there was at least one minibus a day to Aqaba (JD1.500, one hour); 7am is the most reliable departure time and there may be a second departure at 8am. From Sunday to Thursday, you should also find one leaving around 12.30pm and possibly again at 3pm, ferrying teachers from the school back to Aqaba. To Wadi Musa (JD3, 1½ hours) there is a daily minibus at 8.30am. It's a good idea to check at the visitor centre or Rest House when you arrive in Wadi Rum to check current departure times.

If you want to head to Ma'an, Karak or Amman, the minibuses to either Aqaba or Wadi Musa can drop you off at the Ar-Rashidiyya crossroads with the Desert Highway (JD1, 20 minutes), where it is easy enough to hail onward transport.

TAXI

Occasionally taxis hang around the visitor centre (and very occasionally the Rest House) waiting for a fare back to wherever they came from – normally Aqaba, Wadi Musa or Ma'an. Count on about JD15 to Aqaba, and JD20 to Wadi Musa (Petra). A taxi from Rum village to the Ar-Rashidiyya crossroads with the Desert Highway costs around JD4.

QATRANA

☎ 03

One of the few towns along the Desert Highway is Qatrania, a couple of kilometres north of the turn-off to Karak, and a former stop on the pilgrim road between Damascus and

Mecca. The only reason to stop here (if you have your own transport) is to have a quick look at **Qatrania castle** (admission free), built in 1531 by the Ottomans. It has been nicely restored, but nothing is explained.

The **Ba'albaki Tourist Complex** (d with private bathroom JD32), about 8km north of Qatrania on the highway has souvenir shops and a restaurant (buffets JD5). Breakfast is included in room rates.

MA'AN

☎ 03

Ma'an has been a transport junction and trading centre for many centuries and is now one of the larger towns and administrative centres in southern Jordan. There's little of specific interest here, but the centre of town is pleasant enough and some travellers may have to stay overnight while waiting for transport to Wadi Rum, Wadi Musa (for Petra) and Aqaba.

Ma'an has a reputation of being a religiously conservative town and there has been rioting here in recent years (most recently in 2002), largely against price hikes and the US invasion of Iraq, but we found the mood and people in Ma'an nothing but welcoming and friendly. The town is particularly busy during the haj as it lies on the main pilgrimage route from both Jordan and Syria to Mecca in Saudi Arabia.

Orientation & Information

The main north-south thoroughfare is King Hussein St, centred somewhere around the mosque and the communication tower. Here you'll find restaurants and several banks with ATMs. To get here from the bus station head two blocks west then one block north (a five-minute walk) to the southern end of King Hussein St, where it meets Palestine St. The Kreashan Hotel is a further five minutes' walk north of here.

Horizon Internet Centre (☎ 2131700; King Hussein St; per hr JD1; ☎ 9am-10pm), opposite the Housing Bank, has fast connections.

Sleeping & Eating

Kreashan Hotel (Krishan Hotel; ☎ 2132043; Al-Bayyarah St; dm JD2, r JD6, 4-/5-bed r JD10/12.) There's really no need to look further than this good central choice, with clean, simple and sunny rooms and clean shared bathrooms. The more expensive rooms are much better value than

the faded rooms and dorms of the old wing. It's a small block east of the mosque off the northern end of King Hussein St.

Out on the western edge of town, north of the big roundabout, are two basic truck-stop hotels, the **Hotel Tabok** (☎ 2132452; r JD4) and slightly better **Shweikh Hotel** (☎ 2132427; r JD5), a little further north. Both are noisy and hot.

There is a number of excellent grill and chicken restaurants along King Hussein St, including the **Alroz-Al Bokhary** (King Hussein St; mains JD1-2). There's a tempting sweets shop diagonally across from the corner of King Hussein and Palestine Sts. There are good fruit shops nearby on Palestine St.

Getting There & Away

If you can't get a direct bus to where you want to go in Jordan, chances are that you can find a connection in Ma'an.

The station for buses, minibuses and service taxis is a five-minute walk southeast of the centre. Departures from Ma'an start to peter out around 2pm and stop completely around 5pm.

There are regular minibuses (JD1.150, three hours) and less frequent service taxis (JD3, three hours) to/from Amman's Wahadat bus station. To Aqaba, minibuses (JD1, 80 minutes) and service taxis (JD1.400) are also frequent. For Wadi Rum, take an Aqaba-bound minibus to the junction at Ar-Rashidiyya (500 fils) then take a minibus or hitch from here. For Petra, minibuses to Wadi Musa (500 fils, 45 minutes) leave fairly frequently when full and stop briefly at the university en route. You could also try a service taxi (JD1). To Karak, there are occasional service taxis (JD1.750, two hours) and three minibuses (JD1.500) a day, via Tafila (JD1).

A chartered taxi to Petra/Wadi Musa costs around JD5; to Karak or Aqaba, expect to pay JD15.

DISEH

Diseh (or Disi) is northwest of Rum village, about 12km as the vulture flies but 22km by road. Inhabitants and devotees of Wadi Rum insist that Diseh is a very poor cousin. You cannot officially enter the Wadi Rum Protected Area direct from Diseh, but you could easily arrange your transport and guide in Diseh and then enter with them through the main Rum visitors centre. While the scenery

is not as spectacular as it is at Wadi Rum, there are some basic camps in Diseh that have been given the thumbs up from budget travellers and you'll still find yourself sleeping in the silence of what is still a beautiful desert. This can be nice, provided you don't mind being in a camp of other tourists and don't need too many luxuries.

Sights

The paved road to Diseh from the turn-off to Rum offers a few accessible jebels and landscapes, which are easy to explore. Locals will happily (and for a price) drive you out into the desert area north of the railway line, which is dotted with Nabataean and Roman dams, artificial rock bridges, rock carvings and inscriptions. The landscape around **Jebel Amud** is the most interesting. A longer trip could take in the 2m-high rock carvings at **Abu Hawl** (Father of Terror), 7km north of the Bait Ali camp, and on to a rock bridge at **Jebel Kharazeh**. Count on around JD30 for a three-hour trip in a 4WD.

Sleeping & Eating

A number of camps outside Diseh have been recommended by readers. All the following offer beds in cramped individual tents or larger communal Bedouin tents. The first three are next to each other a couple of kilometres southeast of Diseh village.

Zawaideh Desert Camp (☎ 2034525, 079 5840664; zawaideh_camp@yahoo.com; half board per person JD14) Simple but atmospheric, and with hot showers it is decent value.

Captain's Camp (☎ 2016905, 079 5510432; captains@jo.com.jo; half board per person JD25) A well-run mid-range camp with hot showers, a clean bathroom block and good buffets, but it can be swamped by large tour groups. Contact Rafique Suleiman.

Palm Camp (☎ 2033508, 079 5663410; half board per person JD15) A sociable place with a central campfire and lounging area, but the cramped accommodation makes it a step down from the other two camps.

Getting There & Away

You're unlikely to find a minibus or service taxi headed all the way to Diseh, so follow the instructions for getting to Wadi Rum and get out at the turn-off to Diseh (the police checkpoint 16km after leaving the Desert Highway). From there you'll have to

معان

القطرانة

الديسي

hitch 8km (be prepared for quite a wait), or the police might, if you ask nicely, ring ahead to one of the camps where someone is usually happy to come out and pick you up.

Minibuses often run from Dিশে to the Desert Highway for JD1 per person. A single bus runs to Aqaba daily at 7.30am.

AQABA

☎ 03

The balmy winter climate and idyllic setting on the Gulf of Aqaba, ringed by high desert mountains, make this Jordan's aquatic playground. While Amman shivers in winter with temperatures around 5°C and the occasional snowfall, the daytime mercury in Aqaba rarely goes below 20°C and is often

quite a few degrees warmer. In summer, however, the weather is uncomfortably hot, with daytime temperatures over 35°C, but it's often made bearable by the sea breezes. For this reason Aqaba works on siesta time; everything shuts down around 3pm (or earlier) and reopens later in the evening, from around 6pm.

Aqaba is popular with Jordanians from the north (forget trying to get a room during holidays such as Eid al-Adha – see p243), with Saudis from across the border and, somewhat bizarrely, with Hungarian tour groups. It's also an obvious place to break a journey to/from Israel & the Palestinian Territories or Egypt. Diving and snorkelling are Aqaba's main attractions and, while

not as extensive as Egypt, it's still a great place to spend a couple of days exploring the underwater brilliance of the coral-rich gulf. The port does mar the view a little and the beaches close to town are fairly unappealing, but there's a laid-back vibe and it's still a good place to kick back and relax from the rigours of life on the road.

Aqaba has big plans for the future. Several new five-star hotels are planned for the southern coast, including the huge Tala Bay resort and condo project. The Ayla Oasis project to the northwest of town involves the creation of lagoons (adding 19km to Aqaba's coastline), a marina, hotels and a golf course, and there's a new shopping and restaurant complex called Ayla Park, which

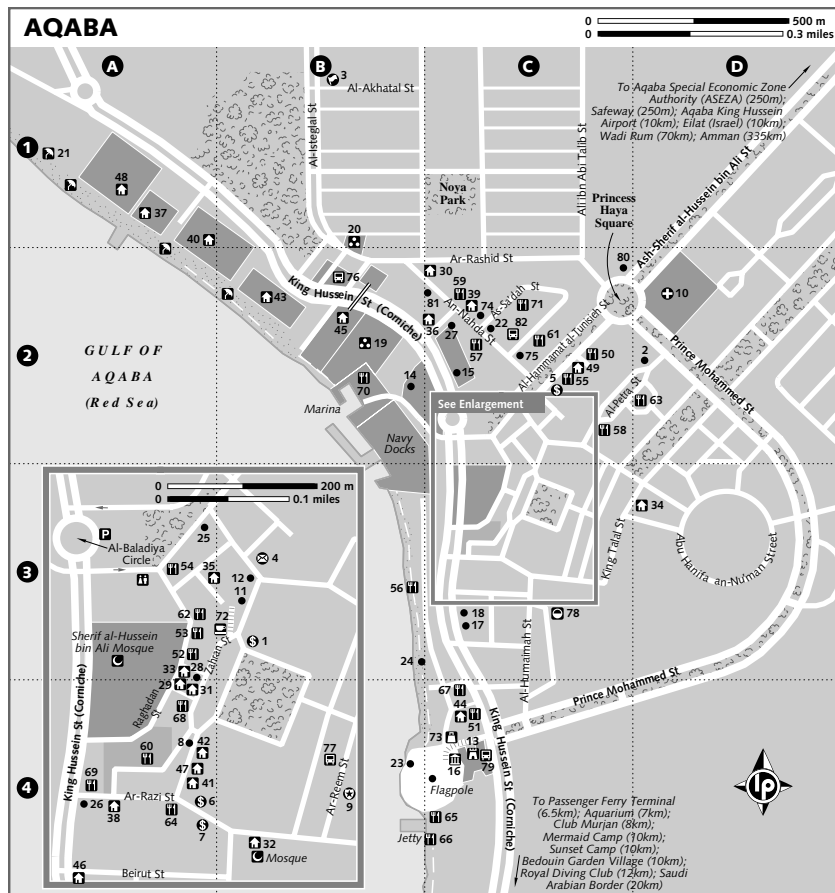
should materialise soon. Expect Aqaba to change rapidly in the next few years as Jordan gears it up to be the 'new Eilat'.

History

And king Solomon made a navy of ships in Ezion-Geber, which is beside Eloth (Eilat), on the shore of the Red Sea, in the land of Edom

1 Kings 9:26

Excavations at Tell al-Khalifa, 4km west of central Aqaba and right on the border of Jordan and Israel & the Palestinian Territories, have revealed the ancient world's largest copper smelters, thought to be the biblical site of Ezion Geber. Smelting was



INFORMATION		SLEEPING		Karmel Restaurant.....(see 56)		
Arab Bank.....1	B3	Al-Amer Hotel.....29	A4	La Dorada Restaurant.....65	C4	
Arab Bank ATM.....(see 37)		Al-Cazar Hotel.....30	C2	Lina House Floating		
Arab Investment Bank.....(see 5)		Al-Kholil Hotel.....31	A4	Restaurant.....66	C4	
DHL.....2	D2	Al-Naheer al-Khaled		National Restaurant.....(see 31)		
Egyptian Consulate.....3	B1	Hotel.....32	B4	Os Urfa Restaurant.....67	C4	
Frindes Laundry.....(see 2)		Al-Shula Hotel.....33	A3	Pastry Shop.....68	A4	
Gate Net.....(see 14)		Al-Zatari Hotel.....34	D3	Pearls Fast Food.....69	A4	
General Post Office.....4	B3	Amira Hotel.....35	A3	Royal Yacht Club		
Jordan Islamic Bank.....5	C2	Aqaba Gulf Hotel.....36	C2	Restaurant.....70	B2	
Jordan National Bank.....6	A4	Aquamarina Beach		Silk Road Restaurant.....71	C2	
Moneychangers.....7	A4	Hotel.....37	A1	Syrian Palace		
Nyazi Tours.....(see 76)		Belal Hotel.....(see 35)		Restaurant.....(see 33)		
Photo Hagop.....8	A4	Crystal Hotel.....38	A4			
Police Station.....9	B4	Dweikh Hotel 1.....(see 35)		DRINKING		
Princess Haya Hospital.....10	D2	Golden Tulip.....39	C2	Al Fardos Coffee Shop.....72	B3	
Rana Dry Clean.....(see 57)		Intercontinental Hotel (under		Baranda Lounge.....(see 14)		
Red Sea Tours.....(see 42)		construction).....40	A1	Dolphin Bar.....(see 54)		
Redwan Bookshop.....11	B3	Jerusalem Hotel.....41	A4	Fun Pub.....(see 45)		
Tourist Office.....(see 16)		Jordan Flower Hotel.....42	A4	Rovers Return.....(see 14)		
Yamani Library (Bookshop).....12	B3	Kempinski Hotel (under		Royal Yacht Club Bar.....(see 70)		
		construction).....43	B2	ENTERTAINMENT		
<th colspan="2">SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES</th> <td>Moon Beach Hotel.....44</td> <td>C4</td> <td>Jordan Experience.....(see 14)</td> <td></td>	SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES		Moon Beach Hotel.....44	C4	Jordan Experience.....(see 14)	
Aqaba Adventure Divers.....(see 27)		Mövenpick Hotel.....45	B2	SHOPPING		
Aqaba Castle (Mamluk		Nairoukh II.....46	A4	Noor al-Hussein Foundation		
Fort).....13	C4	Petra Hotel.....47	A4	Shop.....73	C4	
Aqaba Gateway.....14	B2	Radisson SAS Hotel.....48	A1	TRANSPORT		
Aqaba International Dive		Shweiki Hotel.....49	C2	Al-Cazar Car Rental.....(see 30)		
Centre.....15	C2	<th colspan="2">EATING</th>	EATING		Avis Car Rental.....(see 26)	
Aqaba Museum (Museum of		Al-Mohandes Cafeteria.....50	C2	Europcar.....74	C2	
Aqaba Antiquities).....16	C4	Al-Safara'ah Restaurant.....51	C4	Hertz Car Rental.....75	C2	
Aqaba Turkish Baths.....17	C3	Al-Shami Restaurant.....52	A3	JETT Bus Office.....76	B2	
Arab Divers.....18	C3	Al-Tarboosh Restaurant.....53	A3	Main Bus/Minibus		
Ayla (Old Aqaba) Ruins.....19	B2	Ali Baba Restaurant.....54	A3	Station.....77	B4	
Ayla (Old Aqaba) Ruins (Old		Bakery.....55	C2	Minibus/Service Taxi Station (to		
Church).....20	B1	China Restaurant.....56	B3	Karak & Safi).....78	C3	
Barracuda Beach.....21	A1	Floka Restaurant.....59	C2	Minibuses (to Ferry Terminal,		
Dive Aqaba.....22	C2	Fruit and Vegetable		Southern Beaches & Royal		
Glassbottom Boat Dock.....23	B4	Souq.....60	A4	Diving Club).....79	C4	
Glassbottom Boats.....24	B3	Gelatino Uno.....61	C2	Royal Jordanian.....80	C2	
International Traders.....25	A3	Hani Ami.....62	A3	Thrifty.....81	C2	
Peace Way Tours.....26	A4	Hum Hum Supermarket.....63	D2	Trust International Transport Bus		
Red Sea Diving Centre.....27	C2	Juice Stands.....64	A4	Office.....82	C2	
Sea Star.....(see 30)						
Sinbad.....(see 14)						
Wadi Rum Desert Services.....28	A3					

carried out here from the 10th to 5th centuries BC, with ore coming from mines in Wadi Araba. Ezion Geber was also the ancient port from which King Solomon's fleet departed for the gold mines of Ophir (an unidentified location, possibly Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea or Yemen).

As trade with southern Arabia and Sheba (present-day Yemen) developed, the area around Aqaba thrived thanks to its position on one of the Middle East's major trade routes, with routes leading north to Petra, Damascus and Bosra; west to Egypt and Palestine; and south to Arabia. The recent discovery in Aqaba of ceramics from China and Aksumite coins from Ethiopia highlight the cosmopolitan nature of the port.

The town was occupied by the Ptolemies from Egypt during the 2nd and 3rd centuries BC, and then the Nabataeans from about the 3rd to 1st centuries BC. During Roman times the town was renamed Aqabat Ayla (Pass of Alia) and it housed a garrison of legionaries.

Intriguingly, archaeologists working at Ayla recently unearthed a late 3rd-century church, thought to be the world's oldest purpose-built church (earlier churches have been found but these were built for other purposes and later converted). The sanctuary was used for less than a century before it was destroyed by an earthquake.

In the 10th century, a Muslim traveller described Aqaba as 'a great city' and a meeting place of pilgrims en route to and from Mecca. In AD 1024 the town was sacked by local tribes and in 1068 a huge earthquake split the old city of Ayla in two, consigning the town to a minor historical role.

The Crusaders occupied the town in 1116 and fortified a small island nearby – then called Ile de Graye, but now known as Pharaoh's Island (p231). By 1170 both the port and island were in the hands of the Ayyubids, under Saladin (Salah ad-Din). In 1250 the Mamluks took over. By the beginning of the 16th century the town had been swallowed up by the Ottoman Empire, and lost much of its significance when the main trading area of the region was moved to Baghdad in the middle of the 16th century.

For about 500 years, until the Arab Revolt during WWI, Aqaba remained an insignificant fishing village. Ottoman forces occupying the town were forced to retreat after a raid

by the Arabs and TE Lawrence in 1917. From then on, the British used Aqaba as a supply centre from Egypt for the push up through the Trans-Jordan and Palestine regions.

After WWI, the border between Trans-Jordan and Saudi Arabia had still not been defined, so Britain arbitrarily drew a line a few kilometres south of Aqaba. The Saudis disputed the claim but took no action. As the port of Aqaba grew, the limited coastline proved insufficient, so in 1965 King Hussein traded 6000 sq km of Jordanian desert for another 12km of coastline with Saudi Arabia.

Orientation

King Hussein St (also known as the Corniche) is the main axis of Aqaba. It runs more or less north-south along the coast through the centre of town, and follows the Gulf of Aqaba around to the west as far as Israel & the Palestinian Territories, and to the south as far as Saudi Arabia. In the city, a walking path parallels King Hussein St, but it only hugs the coast in small sections because of the private beaches owned by the upmarket hotels, as well as the marina and navy docks. The massive port facilities start a few kilometres south of the centre.

A huge Jordanian flag marks the southern end of the beach, where you'll find a pleasant plaza and the tourist office. It's a pleasant stroll along the beach to get here.

If you stroll too far north of Barracuda Beach you'll probably be sent back by the police, as King Abdullah owns a residence nearby.

Information BOOKSHOPS

Aqaba has two excellent bookshops that sell a range of international newspapers as well as books about Jordan and the region.

Redwan Bookshop (☎ 2013704; redwanbook@hotmail.com; Zahran St; ☎ 7.30am-12.30pm & 4-9pm) One of the best in Jordan with an extensive selection of newspapers, hard-to-find Jordanian titles, Lonely Planet guidebooks, and German and French novels.

Yamani Library (☎/fax 2012221; Zahran St; ☎ 9am-2.30pm & 6-10pm) A few doors to the north; has a better range of English novels.

EMERGENCY

Police station (☎ 2012411, 191; Ar-Reem St) Opposite the bus station.

Princess Haya Hospital (☎ 2014111) Well equipped and offers decompression chambers (see p228).

INTERNET ACCESS

Aqaba has a good sprinkling of Internet cafés, most of which charge around JD1.

Gate Net (☎ 2017677; Aqaba Gateway; per hr 750 fils, after midnight 500 fils; ☎ 24hr) Has soft drinks for 250 fils.

LAUNDRY

Most visitors stay long enough in Aqaba to get some laundry done – especially useful if you've gathered layers of dust and sand from Wadi Rum.

Frindes Laundry (☎ 2015051; Al-Petra St; ☎ 8am-1pm & 4pm-10pm Sat-Thu) Among the better places, which charges 250/500 fils for t-shirts/shirt or trousers.

Rana Dry Clean (☎ 2013668; An-Nahda St; ☎ 9am-11pm Sat-Thu) Charges are similar.

MONEY

There are dozens of banks and ATMs around the city – see the Aqaba map for locations. Many are located along the southern side of Al-Hammamat al-Tunisieh St.

Numerous moneychangers are congregated around the corner of Zahran and Ar-Razi Sts. They're open longer than the banks, and most change travellers cheques without commission, though check the rate first.

POST

DHL (☎ 2012039, 2011385; Al-Petra St)

General post office (☎ 7.30am-7pm Sat-Thu, 7.30am-1.30pm Fri)

TELEPHONE

Outside the post office is a gaggle of telephone booths, and several stalls nearby sell telephone cards. Other private telephone agencies are located on the main streets, and some moneychangers also offer telephone services. Note that international calls from Aqaba are up to five times cheaper than in Wadi Rum.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Tourist office (☎/fax 2013363; ☎ 8am-2.30pm Sun-Thu) Next to the Aqaba Museum (head for the huge Jordanian flag) at the western end of Prince Mohammed St. Staff are friendly enough but offer little more than a limited range of brochures. A new visitor centre is planned for central Aqaba.

VISA EXTENSIONS

Aqaba Special Economic Zone Authority (ASEZA; ☎ 2091000, 2091031; www.aqabazone.com, info@aseza.jo) Behind Safeway, by the Central Bank of Jordan. You need to register here if you got a free visa on arrival in Aqaba and will stay in Jordan for more than 14 days (see p250). The website has some useful information about Aqaba.

Police station (☎ 2012411; ☎ 7am-9pm Sat-Thu) Opposite the bus station. An extension for a stay of up to three months is usually available on the spot and is free. It's best to go earlier in the day (8am to 3pm). Aqaba is the only reliable place to get your visa extended outside Amman.

Dangers & Annoyances

Women travellers have reported varying degrees of harassment from local lads on the public beaches. This may even happen on the private beaches belonging to the upmarket hotels, to which you should report anything immediately. On the public beaches, foreign women will feel far more relaxed (but not necessarily more comfortable) wearing loose shirts and baggy shorts. See p220 for more details.

Sights

AYLA (OLD AQABA)

Located along the Corniche, and incongruously squeezed between the marina and the Mövenpick Resort, is the site of **Ayla** (admission free; ☎ 24hr), the early medieval port of Aqaba. The ruins are limited, but worth a quick look if you're in the area. Helpful noticeboards in English clearly pinpoint items of interest and put the place in some perspective.

At the back of the parking space behind the JETT bus office is another small section of the old city, including the city wall and the ancient church.

AQABA CASTLE (MAMLUK FORT)

Aqaba castle (admission JD1, includes the Aqaba Museum; ☎ 8am-4pm Sat-Thu, 10am-3pm Fri Oct-Apr, 8am-7pm May-Sep), measures around 50m by 50m although it is unusual in having sides of slightly uneven length. It is worth looking around as it has been partially reconstructed and gives some sense of its original form.

The first castle may have been built by the Crusaders in the 13th century, but most scholars attribute its construction to the Mamluks during the reign of the sultan Qansur al-Ghuri (1510-17), as attested by the attractive inscriptions in Arabic inside the entrance gate. In one of the eastern

rooms off the main courtyard are further inscriptions suggesting that the castle was renovated and enlarged by the Ottomans in both 1587 and 1628. In subsequent centuries the castle was used as a khan (caravanserai) for travelling pilgrims, especially Egyptians, on their way between their homeland and Mecca. The Ottomans occupied the castle until WWI when, in 1917, the fortress was substantially destroyed by shelling from the British Royal Navy. The Hashemite coat of arms above the main entrance was raised soon afterwards as the Arab Revolt swept through Aqaba.

A helpful explanation in English is on a noticeboard at the entrance. You can see stables in the far left corner. The former castle mosque has been turned into offices. Tickets must be purchased at the museum in the visitor centre and entitle you to enter both museum and castle on the same ticket.

AQABA MUSEUM (MUSEUM OF AQABA ANTIQUITIES)

This small **museum** (admission JD1, student 150 fils; ☎ 8am-4pm Sat-Thu, 10am-3pm Fri Oct-Apr, 8am-7pm May-Sep) is located inside the visitor centre. Both the centre and museum were previously the home of Sherif Hussein bin Ali – the great-great-grandfather of the present king, Abdullah II – who lived here for a period of time after WWI.

The collection of artefacts includes coins from Iraq and Egypt, ceramics from the excavations of Ayla (Old Aqaba), 8th-century Islamic stone tablets and some late Byzantine reliefs. All captions are in English and there are some informative descriptions of the items and the archaeological history of the area. The ticket also entitles you to enter the castle.

BEACHES

Aqaba promotes itself as a resort (most pictures feature people happily water-skiing and lazing on the beach), but the town itself is not nearly as developed for such activities as it pretends to be. For most of the water sports action and the better beaches, you'll need to head south of town (see p227). Even here there is often little shade and public transport is limited.

Now that the top-end resorts have gobbed up most of the public beaches north of the centre, the main free **public beach** is

the stretch of sand lined with cafés between the navy docks and Aqaba castle. This isn't really the place for swimming but offers nice sunset strolls and great people watching.

If you wanted to bare some skin you are better off at a private beach. Of the hotel beaches, the Aquamarina Beach Hotel is the cheapest at JD2.500 but the tiny beach really isn't up to much. The Radisson SAS charges JD10 for its small beach. The Mövenpick Resort is the priciest but best at JD16/19 for weekday/weekend use of its beach, three pools, health club and sauna and includes JD5-worth of drink vouchers.

Barracuda Beach (☎ 2109891; fax 2019892; admission JD5, towel hire JD1; ☎ 9am-7pm) offers a good balance between cost and comfort. This new private 100m stretch of clean sandy beach is equipped with hammocks, a cushioned lounge area, a bar, restaurant, pool and lots of water sports. The fun and games include beach buggies, volleyball, Jet Skis, a banana boat, water skiing and weekend beach parties. A dive centre is planned.

Better sandy options further south include the Club Murjan resort, the Royal Diving Centre or the public beaches around the Aqaba Marine Park Visitors Centre (see p227).

Activities

WATER SPORTS

Club Murjan, the Aquamarina Beach Hotel and Barracuda Beach are well set up for various water sports. Nothing is cheap of course: water-skiing and jet-skiing cost around JD1 per minute. Windsurfing (JD5 per hour) and kayaking (JD3 per hour) are cheaper options.

Sindbad (☎ 079 5556076; booth in Aqaba Gateway) operates sunset boat cruises on Thursday and Friday afternoons (JD10 per person) and also a snorkelling boat trip (JD20 per person with lunch). Most hotels can book you on these trips.

GLASS-BOTTOM BOATS

If you can't go diving or snorkelling, the next best thing is a glass-bottom boat. The ride is fun, but the amount of fish and coral is usually disappointing unless you get away from central Aqaba (where much of the coral has died) and hire the boat for two to three hours. The posted rate for a boat (holding about 10 people) is JD15 per

hour but, with patience, you may be able to negotiate the price down to half this. Boats congregate along the central public beach or at a jetty in front of Aqaba castle.

The glass-bottom boats can also be hired for longer trips if you want to go swimming, snorkelling or fishing (bring or hire your own equipment); this is a great day out if you can get a group together. Count on about JD35 per day for a boat holding six people. The budget hotels sometimes organise trips for JD10 per person. Mornings bring the calmer weather.

DIVING & SNORKELLING

For details of the diving sites and snorkelling along the coast south of town, see p227.

Several places in town hire out snorkelling equipment for around JD5, including the dive centres and Barracuda Beach.

HAMMAMS

Aqaba Turkish Baths (☎ 2031605; King Hussein St; ☎ 9am-9pm) offers the full works – massage, steam bath and scrubbing – for JD8. Readers have highly recommended this place. Women are welcome to attend, but need to make a reservation in advance and are charged more as 'special arrangements' are made (you'll get the place to yourself). They try to find female attendants in this case, though this isn't guaranteed.

Tours

If you are thinking on taking a tour to Wadi Rum see p207. These are some of the more experienced agencies offering tours to Wadi Rum:

International Traders (☎ 2013757; aqaba.office@traders.com.jo; Al-Hammamat al-Tunisieh St) Expensive but reliable.

Nyazi Tours (☎ 2022801; www.nyazi.com.jo; King Hussein St) Recommended adventure tour company run by Nyazi Shaba'an, former Director of Antiquities & Tourism in Petra. Camping, hiking, jeep tours and camel trips.

Peace Way Tours (☎ 2022665; www.jordantrips.com; King Hussein St) This agency gets mixed reviews from readers (although it seems to depend on the guide).

Red Sea Tours (Zahran St) A budget agency in the Jordan Flower Hotel.

Wadi Rum Desert Services (☎ 2013882; http://wadirumdesertservice.tripod.com) Near Al-Shami Restaurant, off Zahran St. Another long-standing agency, although with both positive and negative reports from travellers. Also known as Qutaihs & Sons, it operates as a branch of Firas Car Rental.

Trips to Wadi Rum start from JD45 per person per day (including transport, food and an overnight stay in the desert). Make sure you find out exactly what you're getting for your money, including how many meals are covered by the price. See p207 for more on this.

Some agencies also organise day trips to Petra (JD40), but this is poor value as your time in Petra will be very limited and the price doesn't include entrance fees – it's better to budget a couple of days and go under your own steam.

Sleeping

Aqaba is a popular place for Jordanian and Saudi tourists in winter (October to March), with the season (and hotel rates) peaking in April, May, October and November. People also flock to Aqaba from northern Jordan during long weekends and public holidays, especially around Eid al-Adha (immediately after the haj), for which you'd need to book weeks in advance. At these times, prices may increase by as much as 30%.

Just about all hotels, including the budget places listed here, have air-conditioning. In the summer air-conditioning is more a necessity than a luxury, and always make sure it's working before forking out any money. In summer, budget travellers may find it cooler to sleep on the roof of their hotel.

Campers, overlanders, beach bums and dive junkies should consider staying at one of the camps along the beach south of Aqaba (see p231).

BUDGET

Unless it is stated otherwise, most places listed here offer (non-satellite) TV, air-conditioning and a private bathroom with hot water (not always reliable). Most places don't include breakfast but can usually rustle up something unsatisfying for around JD1.500. Tariffs in most budget places are negotiable by JD1 to JD3 per person, especially in quieter times.

Al-Amer Hotel (☎ /fax 2014821; Raghadan St; s/d JD12/14) Good upper-budget value here, with sunny, clean rooms. Ask for a room at the front where the views are great.

Al-Naher al-Khaled Hotel (☎ 2012456; zv51@hotmail.com; Ar-Razi St; s/d JD14/18) Rates here can be negotiated down to JD8/10 in off-season, which is good value. The full rates are much

poorer value. Rooms are pleasant, bright and clean. Rooms at the front are noisy because the glass doesn't quite fit properly and those at the back have French windows which don't lock (though you'd be very unlucky to have anything stolen).

Al-Kholil Hotel (☎/fax 2030152; Zahran St; s/d JD10/12, with balcony JD12/14) One of the better places in the area, though the low ceilings seem to have been designed by hobbits. It's really worth paying extra for a balcony as these make the rooms.

Jordan Flower Hotel (☎ 2014378; s/d with shared bathroom JD7/8, with private bathroom JD10/11) A simple place but probably the best of three cheapies next to each other on Zahran St. The rooms are a bit grubby and vary so look at a few. The pricier rooms come with a balcony.

Petra Hotel (☎ 2013746; s/d without bathroom JD5/7, with private cold-water bathroom JD6/8, with private hot-water bathroom JD8/10) The cheapest options are pretty bleak and most rooms don't have windows but there's a lot of variety so look around. The three rooms with balconies have terrific views. Lone women travellers should probably stay elsewhere.

Jerusalem Hotel (☎ 2014815; s/d JD5/8) Probably the most run-down and least welcoming of the three cheap places located in Zahran.

Three slightly more expensive places are next door to each other at the northern end of Zahran St. They are located in a quiet off-street courtyard with an open-air café out the front and some rooms have balconies. All are friendly places.

Amira Hotel (☎/fax 2018840; s/d JD12/18) Best of this bunch and one of several other budget hotels that bizarrely have exactly the same furniture. Aim for a clean bathroom, a small balcony and a quiet room away from the street. Prices include breakfast.

Belal Hotel (☎ 2019284, fax 2019285; s/d JD12/18) The Belal is slightly better than the Dweikh if you can score one of the 'non-fragrant' rooms. Satellite TV and a decent bathroom are a bonus. The hotel was formerly known as Nairoukh I.

Dweikh Hotel I (☎ 2012984; fax 2012985; s/d JD10/15) From the puke-green corridors to the poky bathrooms, the rooms at the Dweikh are a bit knackered.

MIDRANGE

Every place listed here has a fridge, air-conditioning, TV (usually satellite), tele-

phone and private hot water bathroom. If you can negotiate a discounted price, these places are great value. Prices include breakfast unless otherwise stated.

Al-Zatari Hotel (☎ 2022970; fax 2022974; King Talal St; side rooms s/d/tr JD18/28/35, front-view rooms JD20/32/39, plus tax; ☎) Well-run and highly recommended, with well-appointed rooms, a balcony and a nice coffee shop/restaurant. The staff are also friendly. It's just a short walk downhill to the town centre. Front-facing rooms are worth the extra money as they are bigger and have better views.

Nairoukh II Hotel (☎ 2012980; nairoukh2hot@hot mail.com; King Hussein St; s/d JD 15/22) Despite the mind-bending carpet, this is good value: close to the centre; modern rooms; helpful staff; and great views over the gulf. Single rooms are smaller and don't have the views. Single/double room rates rise to JD19/27.500 in April, May, October and November.

Moon Beach Hotel (☎/fax 2013316; King Hussein St; s/d without sea view JD12, s/d with sea view JD17/30) A stone's throw from the castle and hence removed from (but easy walking distance to) the bustle of central Aqaba. The rooms are clean and pleasant and most have great views. Five new rooms come with beach views. Credit cards are accepted. A good family option.

Crystal Hotel (☎ 2022001; fax 2022006; Ar-Razi St; s/d JD20/30) Walk into the plush marble lobby and you'll feel like you're in an upmarket hotel. The rooms are very comfortable and spacious, if a little sterile; the large corner rooms are by far the best. Add JD3 per person for breakfast. The official rates of JD40/55 rarely apply.

Al-Shula Hotel (☎ 2015153; alshula@wanadoo.jo; Raghadan St; s/d JD15/20) Right in the heart of the action, the rooms here are smaller than some other hotels, but it's quiet and well run and rooms on the west side have excellent views of Eilat in Israel & the Palestinian Territories. Add JD5 in high season. Don't get too excited when you arrive; the lobby is grander than the rooms.

Shweiki Hotel (☎ 2022657; fax 2022659; Hammamat St; s/d/tr JD16/24/28) Another good-value central option. Rooms are spacious with good bathrooms and some come with nice coastal views. Rooms without balcony are a little cheaper; all rates are open to discussion.

Al-Cazar Hotel (☎ 2014131; alcsea@alcazar.com.jo; An-Nahda St; s/d JD25/35; ☎) This is a big tour-

group hotel, with pleasant spacious rooms with balcony, a swimming pool, pub, and on-demand DVD cinema, though it's getting a bit faded these days and can be gloomy during low season. One big plus is that guests get free access to Club Murjan, a water sports centre (p231) to which the hotel runs transport twice a day.

Aquamarina Beach Hotel (☎ 2016250; www.aquamarina-group.com, aquama@go.com.jo; s/d JD25/30, sea view JD30/40; ☎) This substandard Euro-resort, popular with Hungarian groups, is the faded, ugly sister squeezed in between glamorous siblings the Radisson and InterContinental. Facilities include a swimming pool, a grim video arcade, a bar and a water sports and dive centre (p229). Sea-view rooms are worth the extra money. There's an Arab Bank ATM (for Visa) at the gate. It's a cheap option if you don't mind the old-fashioned interiors.

Golden Tulip (☎ 2031901; www.goldentulip.com, goldtulip@go.com.jo; s/d JD50/60, discounted to JD30/40; ☎) A modern and fresh four-star choice, with an interior atrium, decent bar, rooftop plunge pool and good location with lots of restaurants nearby. The 110 rooms are nicely decorated, with cool tiled floors and a balcony.

Aqaba Gulf Hotel (☎ 2016636; www.aqabagulf.com; King Hussein St; JD45/55; ☎) Excellent if you can get the discount rates routinely offered when things are quiet. The luxurious rooms, swimming pool, tennis courts, bar, restaurants and service are what you'd expect from a four-star place.

TOP END

Radisson SAS Hotel (☎ 2012426; aqaba@radisson.com.jo; King Hussein St; s/d with city view JD60/65, sea view JD70/75; ☎) A comfortable rather than opulent four-star option, with a small beach (flanked by ugly walls), kid's entertainment centre and a beach bar/grill (mains JD5-7).

Mövenpick Resort Hotel (☎/fax 2034020; www.movenpick-aqaba.com; King Hussein St; standard/seaview/superior d JD78/85/96; ☎) Aqaba's finest and most stylish digs, deserving its five stars, with lovely interiors decorated with mosaics and Moroccan lamps. The huge pool and beach complex across the road has three pools, a gym (open 6am-10pm), lovely gardens and the Red Sea Grill. Other restaurants include the Palm Court buffet (JD15), and Italian and Lebanese restaurants, both with a lovely outdoor terrace.

This is the place to spoil yourself with Swiss ice-cream specials, buffet blowouts and a fine health club. Disabled-accessible rooms are available.

The InterContinental and Kempinski are two five-star options under construction at the time of research. The InterContinental is due to have 255 rooms, wi-fi Internet, a 200m beach, the largest pool in Aqaba, six restaurants and its own marina.

Eating

Aqaba has a large range of places to eat to suit almost all budgets, and many travellers will relish the plentiful seafood, although it can be expensive – for the lobster (summer only) expect to pay JD35. Aqaba's signature dish is its *sayadieh* – fish on a bed of rice with a tomato, onion and pepper sauce.

BUDGET

Al-Mohandes Cafeteria (Al-Hammamat al-Tunisieh St; ☎ 7.30am-midnight) Very popular with locals for cheap and tasty shwarma and felfel in a clean and lively setting.

Pearls Fast Food (☎ 2015057; Ar-Razi St; snacks from 500 fils, mains JD2.500-3.500; ☎ 24hr) Ideal if you crave a burger with chips at 3am, and it also does a range of main dishes and breakfast.

Syrian Palace Restaurant (☎/fax 2014788; Raghadan St; starters under JD1, mains JD2-6; ☎ 10am-midnight) A good option for Syrian and Jordanian food, including fish, at moderate prices. The tables situated by the window are the best and the service is good if a little slow. It's next to the Al-Amer Hotel.

Al-Tarboosh Restaurant (☎ 2018518; Raghadan St; pastries around 200 fils; ☎ 7.30am-midnight) One of two pastry shops that offer a great range of meat, cheese and veggie pastries that they'll heat up for you in their huge oven.

Al-Shami Restaurant (☎ 2016107; Raghadan St; starters under JD1, mains JD2-6; ☎ 10am-1am) In a lane between Raghadan and Zahran Sts, the Shami is another cheap place recommended by readers. The menu (printed in English outside) is extensive and the air-conditioned dining area upstairs has good views.

National Restaurant (☎ 2012207; Zahran St; mains from JD2.500; ☎ 7.30am-midnight) Under Al-Kholil Hotel, this is a busy place and deservedly so. The meat and chicken dishes come with salads and hummus and are a great deal.

Al-Safarah Restaurant (King Hussein St; meals from JD1; ☎ lunch & dinner) One of two good open-air

restaurants located next to each other by the entry access to the southern end of the public beach. Good-value shwarma meals and grilled chicken dishes make this the best value place in town.

Ös Urfa Restaurant (☎ 6146020; King Hussein St) A Turkish restaurant nearby that's fast getting a good reputation for its tasty eggplant and meat dishes, a range of Turkish mezeze and good grills.

Karmel Restaurant (Raghadan St; ☎ 7am-1am) Not much more than a collection of open-air tables here next to the Al-Amer Hotel, serving nothing but tea, excellent hummus, fuul and felafel, but it's packed every night.

MIDRANGE & TOP END

Ali Baba Restaurant (☎ 2013901; Raghadan St; starters under JD1, mains JD3-7; ☎ 8am-midnight) This old-timer draws the crowds for its pleasant outdoor seating and central location but it's trading on its past reputation according to many readers. There's plenty of mezeze, grilled meats and fish, including *sayadieh* (JD7), plus breakfast food and good cakes.

China Restaurant (☎ 2014415; Al-Petra St; dishes JD2.500-3, large beer JD1.800; ☎ 11.30am-3pm & 6.30-11pm) The cook at this good place is Chinese and his restaurant has long maintained a high standard, getting numerous repeat visitors. Prices are reasonable.

Captain's Restaurant (☎ 2016905; An-Nahda St; starters 600 fils-JD6, mains JD3-6; ☎ 8am-midnight) Near the Chill House; has a pleasant dining area around the side. Seafood starts from JD5.500, including *sayadieh*, which isn't bad, or try a seafood salad (JD3.500). Breakfast is also served (600 fils to JD1.600).

Mina House Floating Restaurant (☎ 2012699; starters from 650 fils, mains from JD3.500; ☎ noon-midnight) This is an old favourite but recent travellers' reports suggest that it's now become more of a local male hang-out, so lone women might want to get a second opinion before heading out here. The restaurant is on a boat moored (or rather cemented) to the shore south of Aqaba castle. Fish starts at JD7 per 500g, which is good considering it is always freshly caught, and not frozen as in some other Aqaba restaurants. The setting is very pleasant, with good views over the gulf to Eilat and Taba.

La Dorada Restaurant (☎ 2033137; meze JD1-2, mains JD3.500, fish JD6; ☎ lunch & dinner) There's a relaxed Mediterranean fishing port vibe here,

serving up *sayadieh*, paella, shrimp, Lebanese mezeze and a good selection of wines.

Royal Yacht Club Restaurant (☎ 2022404; www.romero-jordan.com; Royal Yacht Club; starters JD1-2, antipasto JD3-6, mains JD6-12; ☎ noon-11.30pm) With views of the marina, this is an upscale and elegant place to savour a romantic sunset and mingle with Aqaba's nouveau riche. The Italian menu includes some interesting items like a crab, avocado, shrimp and artichoke salad, and mussels Provençale, before ending abruptly and rather sadly with a 'cheeseburger'. Arrive early and grab a drink at the pleasant bar.

Floka Restaurant (☎ 2030860; An-Nahda St; starters JD4.500-6, mains JD5.500-11; ☎ 12.30-11.30pm) Many readers have recommended this seafood restaurant and it's a good choice for an upmarket dinner. The catch of the day normally includes sea bream, silver snapper, grouper and goatfish, and there's a good fish stew (JD5.500). Choose between indoor or outdoor seating. Credit cards are accepted.

Silk Road Restaurant (☎ 2033556; As-Sa'dah St; meze JD1-3, fish dishes JD6-7, seafood JD6-10; ☎ noon-midnight) One of Aqaba's finest restaurants, this is a great place to blow the budget or celebrate a special occasion. It would be a false economy not to try the delicious seafood salads, chowders or main courses. There are three attractive dining areas, with traditional low seating, and nightly (Russian!) belly-dancers in summer which you can easily enjoy or escape. There's also an extensive, reasonably priced wine and alcohol list (a draught Amstel costs JD2).

SELF-CATERING

The best supermarket is **Humam Supermarket** (☎ 2015721; Al-Petra St; ☎ 8.30am-2.30pm & 4-11pm). **Safeway** (☎ 8am-midnight) is quite a hike away, 750m north of Princess Haya Hospital.

The **Fruit and Vegetable souq** hidden at the southern end of Raghadan St is the best place for fruit and vegetables.

The best **bakery** (Al-Hammamat al-Tunisieh St; ☎ 6am-11pm) is unsigned in English.

CAFÉS & ICE-CREAM PARLOURS

There are popular **beachfront cafés** along north of the Aqaba castle (where the front row seats of the cafés are so close to the water that you can wet your toes while you whet your whistle). No alcohol is served at these public places.

The **juice stands** (750 fils-JD1.500) on Ar-Razi St are popular places for travellers to hang out at and meet others.

Al-Fardos Coffee Shop (coffee 500 fils), just off Zahran St, is a traditional coffeehouse where local men sip coffee, play backgammon and stare open-mouthed at Arabic music videos. It has a pleasant outdoor setting and foreign women are welcome.

To help alleviate heatstroke in summer, head for anywhere that sells ice cream, such as **Hani Ali** (Raghadan St), a sugar-addict's paradise of traditional sweets and delicious ice cream; or **Gelato Uno** (off An-Nahda St) behind the Hertz car rental office.

Drinking

All the top-end hotels have bars, and most offer some kind of happy hour from 6pm to 7.30pm. For traditional Arabic dancing, and somewhat dubious cabaret acts, head to the nightclub in the **Aquamarina Beach Hotel** (☎ 2016250; www.aquamarina-group.com).

Baranda Lounge (☎ 077 7232444; upper story, Aqaba Gateway; beer JD2-3.500) Yes, this is a 'bar and a lounge' and the coolest one in town at that. It's a relaxed and friendly place with sensible prices, a lovely terrace and a patio out back that captures the sea breezes at night. Good food is served until midnight (steaks are JD6.500) and bar snacks until 3am.

Rovers Return (☎ 2032030; Aqaba Gateway; pint of Amstel/Guinness JD2.740/4.300) A branch of the Amman expat favourite but with cheaper drink prices thanks to the lower taxes.

Royal Yacht Club (☎ 2022404; beer JD2.500-3.500) Above the Romero Restaurant in the marina, this is the pick of the upmarket crowd. It's a sophisticated place to enjoy the sunset and catch some late afternoon sea breezes.

Fun Pub (☎ 2034020; Mövenpick Hotel; ☎ 8pm-2am) The best of the hotel bars, with a happy hour from 8pm to 9pm.

Entertainment

Aqaba Gateway (☎ 2012200; Al-Baladiyah Circle) has the best collection of restaurants, fast food, shops, bars and a cinema.

Jordan Experience (☎ 2022200; Aqaba Gateway; jex@aqabagateway.com; admission JD6) Families will like this multimedia experience that starts off through a Disney-style *siq* and ends with a 40-minute film that simulates a flying-carpet tour of Jordan, complete with moveable seats. There are three shows a day.

Barracuda Beach (p220) has Friday-night beach parties in summer, with a cover charge of around JD10.

Shopping

There are plenty of shops around the centre of Aqaba selling the usual range of tourist souvenirs, including the ever-popular (but rather crap) bottles of coloured sand. You'll have to pick through the tack to find what you're looking for.

One shop which stands out for its quality is the **Noor Al-Hussein Foundation shop** (☎ 2012601; ☎ 8am-6pm, until 7pm May-Sep), located opposite the museum. Profits from the sale of its high-standard products go to help supporting marginalised communities throughout Jordan. Items include silver jewellery from Wadi Musa, petroglyph designs from Wadi Rum, kilims, clothes, embroidery, basketwear and ceramics. Credit cards are accepted.

Photo Hagop (☎ 2012025; Zahran St; ☎ 8.30am-11pm) has several branches around town and offers developing (JD4.500 for 36 prints), print and slide film, digital accessories and video cartridges (from JD3.500).

Getting There & Away

AIR

Aqaba has Jordan's only commercial **airport** (☎ 2012111) outside Amman, although it only awakes from its slumber when a flight is about to leave or arrive. There are weekly international flights to Paris and Sharm El-Sheikh in Egypt. Located 10km north of town.

Royal Jordanian (☎ 2014477; www.rja.com.jo; Ash-Sherif al-Hussein bin Ali St; ☎ 9am-5pm Sun-Thu) Operates flights to Amman's Queen Alia International Airport on Friday and Saturday. This is the place to buy, confirm or change Royal Jordanian or Royal Wings air tickets. Tickets to Amman cost JD39 one way.

Royal Wings (www.royalwings.com.jo) A subsidiary of Royal Jordanian, flies between Aqaba and Amman's Marka airport twice daily.

BOAT

There are two daily boat services to Nuweiba in Egypt. For information about these services see p261.

There is no real need to buy your ticket in advance as they never sell out (except perhaps during the haj - see p243); just purchase the ticket at the ferry terminal when departing.

BUS

From Aqaba to Amman it's worth paying for the comfort, speed and air-conditioning of a JETT or Trust private bus. Try to book tickets for these at least a day in advance. Buses for both companies leave from outside their respective offices.

From the **JETT bus office** (☎ 2015223; King Hussein St), next to the Mövenpick Hotel, buses run five times daily to Amman (JD4.300, four hours), between 7am and 5pm. The office is a 10-minute walk from the centre.

Trust International Transport (☎ 2039480; Just off An-Nahda St) has six daily buses to Amman (JD5, four hours), the first at 7.30am and the last at 6pm. There are also buses to Irbid (JD8, 5½ hours) at 8.30am, 10.30am and 3.30pm.

Ordinary public buses travel between the main bus/minibus station in Aqaba and Amman's Wahadat station (JD3.500, five hours) about every hour between 7am and 3pm, sometimes later. **Afana** has services about every hour between 7am and 10pm from Aqaba bus station to Abdali station in Amman.

There is talk of moving the bus station to the northern outskirts of Aqaba.

CAR

Aqaba has branches of all the major car-hire agencies. Most charge a 'drop fee' (JD25) if you wish to leave the car in Amman or at Queen Alia International Airport. Hiring in Aqaba makes some sense as public transport in the south of the country is less frequent and requires more connections than in the north. Aqaba is also far easier to drive around than Amman.

See p264 for tips on hiring and driving a car in Jordan. If you are a nervous driver it's worth paying the 'collision damage waiver' (CDW) where available, which means you pay nothing additional in the case of an accident.

Al-Cazar Car Rental (☎ 2014131; alcsea@alcazar.com.jo; An-Nahda St) Reliable agency that charges from JD35 per day with unlimited kilometres, plus JD5 for CDW.

Avis (☎ 2022883; avis@go.com.jo; King Hussein St) Charges from JD30 per day for a couple of days' hire, with unlimited kilometres; 4WDs cost JD90. CDW costs JD7 per day. Located inside the Housing Bank Centre.

Europcar (☎ 2019988; An-Nahda St) From JD25 to JD30 per day, plus JD7 for CDW.

Hertz (☎ 2016206; hertz@go.com.jo; An-Nahda St) From JD35 per day with unlimited kilometres. Strangely,

paying the JD10 per day CDW still leaves you with US\$100 to pay in the event of an accident.

Thrifty (☎ 2030313; An-Nahda St) Opposite the Al-Cazar Hotel.

You may be faced with a brief customs check as you enter the Aqaba Special Economic Zone by road from the north.

MINIBUS

To Wadi Musa (for Petra), minibuses (JD3, two hours) leave when full between 7am and 2pm; the exact departure times depend on the number of passengers and you may have to wait an hour or two (which is often longer than the actual travel time...). Otherwise, get a connection in Ma'an (JD1.500, 80 minutes) for which there are hourly departures throughout the day.

A couple of minibuses go to Wadi Rum (JD1, one hour), at around 6.30am and, more reliably, 11am. You may find afternoon buses at 1pm and 3pm. On Friday there is usually only one minibus a day. At other times, catch a minibus towards Ma'an, disembark at the turn-off to Wadi Rum at Ar-Rashidiyya and then hitch a ride to Rum village (30km) from there.

Minibuses to Amman (JD4, five hours) leave hourly throughout the day.

All of the above minibuses leave from the main bus/minibus station on Ar-Reem St. Minibuses to Karak (JD2, three hours), via Safi and the Dead Sea Highway, are the exception, leaving from the small station next to the mosque on Al-Humaimah St.

TAXI & SERVICE TAXI

From the main bus/minibus station, service taxis head to Amman (JD5, five hours), but far less regularly than buses and minibuses. To Karak (JD3.250, three hours) they leave from the small station on Al-Humaimah St. Service taxis start lining up at either station at 6am and many have left by 8am so get an early start. Chartering a taxi costs around JD25 one way to Petra and to Wadi Rum return.

Chartering a taxi between Aqaba and the Israel & the Palestinian Territories border costs around JD5. For details on crossing the southern border to/from Israel & the Palestinian Territories, see p257. A few hardy-looking 4WD service taxis go to destinations in Saudi Arabia.

Getting Around**TO/FROM THE AIRPORT**

Aqaba's **King Hussein Airport** (☎ 2012111) is located 10km north of town, close to the border with Israel & the Palestinian Territories. There's no bus to the airport, so take service taxi 8 (15 minutes, around JD1) from the main bus station, or take a taxi for around JD5. Be wary of unscrupulous taxi drivers trying to fleece unsuspecting tourists who have just arrived in Aqaba.

TO/FROM THE FERRY TERMINAL & SOUTHERN COAST

Minibuses (250 fils) leave from near the entrance to Aqaba castle on King Hussein St for the Saudi border via the southern beaches, camps, dive sites and Royal Diving Centre, passing en route the ferry terminal for boats to Egypt. Minibuses returning to Aqaba can be full of construction workers heading off shift from 2pm to 3pm. A private taxi from central Aqaba to the ferry terminal shouldn't cost more than JD2, though some try for JD4. A seat in a shared taxi costs JD1.

TAXI

Hundreds of private (yellow) taxis cruise the streets beeping at any tourist (Jordanian or foreign) silly enough to walk around in the heat rather than take an air-conditioned taxi. Taxis are unmetered so prices are en-

tirely negotiable, and the drivers in Aqaba enjoy the sport. Most rides cost between 500 fils and JD1.

SOUTH OF AQABA

The road south of Aqaba stretches about 18km to the Saudi Arabian border at Ad-Durra. Much of the coastline is taken up by the massive port facilities, but there are a few beaches, as well as some excellent diving and snorkelling spots. Minibuses run down the road from near Aqaba castle on King Hussein St to the Saudi border.

Diving & Snorkelling

The northern end of the Gulf of Aqaba enjoys high salinity, and the winds from the north and minimal tides mean the water stays clear. The temperature of the water is warm (an average 22.5°C in winter and 26°C in summer), attracting a vast array of fish, and helping to preserve the coral.

The **Jordan Royal Ecological Society** (☎ 06 5679142; www.jreds.org) says the gulf has over 110 species of hard coral, 120 species of soft coral and about 1000 species of fish. These include colourful goatfish, leopard flounder, clown fish, trigger fish; various species of butterfly fish, parrot fish, angel fish; and the less endearing spiky sea urchin, poisonous stonefish, scorpion fish, sea snakes, jellyfish and moray eels. Green turtles and hermit crabs can also be found

RED SEA AQABA MARINE PARK

Jordan's only stretch of coastline is the northern part of the Gulf of Aqaba, and it's home to over 300 types of coral and numerous species of fish and marine life. Jordan's only port (and the region's major shipping lane) and resort cause real problems for the fragile marine environment.

In an attempt to halt the damage, the **Aqaba Marine Park** (☎ 2019405; fax 2014206) was established in 1997. The park stretches for about 8.5km, from the Marine Science Station to the Royal Diving Club, and extends about 350m offshore and 50m inland. The park contains about 80% of Jordan's public beaches and most of the decent diving and snorkelling spots, so the park managers are trying to find the right balance between promoting tourism and preserving the marine environment.

Local and foreign environmentalists have managed to ban fishing and limit boating in the park, and have established jetties into the sea so that divers and snorkellers can jump into the water rather than wade out over coral from the beach. Park rangers ensure that visitors and locals obey the strict environmental protection laws.

The park managers also hope to conduct a public awareness campaign for locals (particularly children) and all divers and snorkellers, lobby the government to enforce local environmental laws, and conduct further research into the damage caused by tourism and pollution. The Marine Science Station, south of Aqaba, is also deeply involved in the preservation of the marine environment.

and even (harmless) whale sharks pay a visit in summer.

One unwelcome natural visitor in the area is the Crown of Thorns Starfish (known as COTS), which feeds on and kills local coral. Divers are requested to notify their dive master if they spot these starfish.

BOOKS

Lonely Planet's *Diving and Snorkeling Guide to The Red Sea* concentrates on sites along the Egyptian coast, but has a detailed section about diving around the Gulf of Aqaba. The major bookshops in Aqaba (see p218) have a good range of books about diving, such as the *Introduction to the Marine Life of Aqaba*. The Redwan Bookshop sells the plastic *Red Sea Fishwatchers Field Guide*, which can be taken underwater to identify species of fish and coral.

HEALTH

If you're cut by coral, or stung by a stonefish, see above for advice and remedies. The **Princess Haya Hospital** (☎ 2014111) in Aqaba is well equipped for diving mishaps, and even has a

decompression chamber (☎ 2014117), where staff are trained to deal with diving accidents. **Dr Jamil Refari** (☎ 077 7411345, 02 2015021) is one doctor who has been recommended. The reputable dive centres are equipped with emergency oxygen tanks, a first-aid kit and a mobile phone.

It's important to remember that, if you dive to any depth, it is dangerous to gain altitude until at least 12 hours after your dive. This applies to the roads to Petra and Amman, as well as flights. Deeper dives require an even longer time period.

DIVING & SNORKELLING SITES

The coast between Aqaba and the Saudi Arabian border boasts about 30 diving and snorkelling sites. Of these, about 25 can be enjoyed by snorkellers and all but one is accessible from a jetty or beach.

Sites are not signposted, nor are they remotely obvious from the road; if you want to dive or snorkel independently you'll have to ask for directions, or take pot luck. Snorkellers will find it far better to pay the extra money and use the private beaches run by the Royal Diving Club or Club Murjan.

The following are the more popular sites (listed in order from Aqaba). You can also snorkel at Pharaoh's Island, which is in Egyptian waters; see p231.

First Bay Offshore from the Marine Science Station, it has good coral gardens for divers at a depth of 8m to 15m.

***King Abdullah Reef** Named after the king (an avid diver) and offshore just north of the Mermaid Camp, it has good visibility and decent but unspectacular coral. It's easily accessible from the beach, and the coral starts about 20m offshore.

***Black Rock** Offshore from Mermaid Camp, this site boasts diverse species of soft coral, with occasional visits by turtles, and is good for snorkellers.

Cedar Pride This Lebanese freighter was deliberately sunk to create a diving site in 1985. It's only 200m offshore, and in water about 20m deep. The wreck is covered with bright, soft coral and is home to schools of colourful fish. The waves can be a bit harrowing at times, however, and the sea urchins can be a pain. Sadly, this is also the site with the most litter.

***Japanese Garden** Located just south of the Cedar Pride, this site is ideal for snorkellers and has a stunning array of coral.

***Gorgonian I** This reef is probably the best place for snorkelling, although the waves can be difficult. The coral is superb, and there's plenty of marine life and the chance to see sea turtles.

RESPONSIBLE DIVING & SNORKELLING

To help preserve the ecology and beauty of the reefs, please consider the following tips when diving or snorkelling:

- Do not touch or feed fish, and minimise your disturbance of marine animals. In particular, do not ride on the backs of turtles as this causes them great anxiety. Feeding fish may disturb their normal eating habits, encourage aggressive behaviour or be detrimental to their health.
- Do not touch or remove any marine life or coral, dead or alive, from the sea or beach. Dragging equipment across the reef can also do serious damage. Polyps can be damaged by even the gentlest of contact. Never stand on coral – instead use a jetty (or boat) to reach the water, even if the coral looks solid and robust.
- Be conscious of your fins. Even without contact, the surge from heavy fin strokes near the reef can damage delicate organisms. When treading water in shallow reef areas, take care not to kick up clouds of sand. Settling sand can easily smother the delicate organisms of the reef.
- Do not throw any rubbish into the sea or leave it on the beach. Plastics in particular are a serious threat to marine life. Turtles can mistake plastic for jellyfish and eat it.
- Ensure that boat anchors are on buoys, and not attached to precious coral, and take care not to ground boats on coral
- Practice and maintain proper buoyancy control. Major damage can be done by divers descending too fast and colliding with the reef.
- Resist the temptation to buy coral or shells. Aside from the ecological damage, taking marine souvenirs depletes the beauty of a site and spoils the enjoyment of others – and is illegal in Jordan.

***Gorgonian II** This is similar in size, accessibility and standard to Gorgonian I, but the coral is not as good; there are numerous moray eels.

***New Canyon** A sunken WWII Russian tank lies 30m offshore and at a depth of just 5m. Further into the sandy canyon, the walls are lined with coral.

Blue Coral This is another sloping reef, with hard and soft coral at shallow depths.

Moon Valley Accessible from the beach, about 800m north of, and run by, the Royal Diving Club, this sandy area has a sloping reef and a varied, but unremarkable, array of fish and coral. Napoleon fish are often found at greater depths.

Aquarium Not to be confused with the aquarium at the Marine Science Station, this is the name given to the reef accessible from the jetty at the Royal Diving Club. There are enough colourful fish, and soft and hard coral, to impress all divers and snorkellers. The southern area offers the best opportunity for underwater photography.

Saudi Border Wall The coral is perfectly preserved but, because it's only about 300m north of the Jordan/Saudi border, divers should take great care – the best sections are not accessible by snorkellers.

* best snorkelling sites

DIVING CENTRES

Most of the dive agencies have offices in Aqaba where you can arrange your equip-

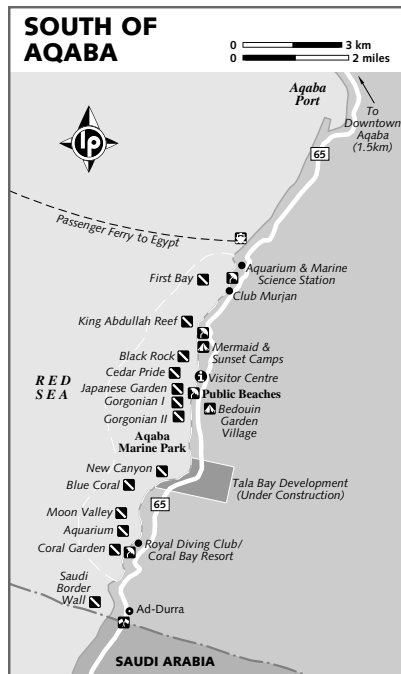
ment and destination. The price per dive invariably decreases the more you do. The most professional agencies include:

Aqaba Adventure Divers (☎ 079 5843724; www.aqaba-adventure-divers.com) Runs a dive shop in downtown Aqaba, and operates dives in conjunction with Bedouin Garden Village Camp. A single dive with equipment costs JD24, open water course JD240, advanced JD180. Snorkelling gear is JD5. Contact Talal Abumahfouz.

Aqaba International Dive Centre (☎ /fax 2031213; diveaqaba@yahoo.com) Off King Hussein St. This popular, friendly and well-equipped centre charges JD17 per dive including transport and all equipment (JD15 if you do two dives on the same day). An open-water Professional Association of Diving Instructors (PADI) course costs JD200.

Arab Divers (☎ 2031808; arabdivers@hotmail.com; King Hussein St) On the 2nd floor, next to Nairok II Hotel. This friendly dive company has been highly recommended by a number of readers; it charges JD16 for the first dive with full equipment, JD30 for an introductory dive, JD25 per person per night dive (minimum of two people) and JD210 for the open-water PADI course. The company also runs other courses and the instructors speak English, German, French and Japanese. All dives are beach dives.

Dive Aqaba (☎ 2034849; www.diveaqaba.com) A dive with all equipment costs JD25; day trip with two dives, drinks and lunch JD55; day trip snorkelling JD20; discover diving for novices with two dives JD70; open water course



SAFETY GUIDELINES FOR DIVING & SNORKELLING

Before embarking on a diving or snorkelling trip, careful consideration should be given to making it a safe as well as enjoyable experience. You should:

- Possess a current diving certification card from a recognised scuba diving instructional agency
- Obtain reliable information about physical and environmental conditions at the dive site (eg from a reputable local dive centre)
- Be aware of marine park regulations and etiquette about marine life and the environment; see p229
- Dive only at sites within your realm of experience; if you can, engage the services of a competent, professionally trained dive instructor or dive master
- Be aware that underwater conditions vary significantly from one region, or even site, to another: seasonal changes can significantly alter any site and dive conditions, which influences the way divers dress for a dive and what diving techniques they use
- Ask about the environmental characteristics that can affect your diving and how local trained divers deal with these considerations

JD235; advanced open water JD185. Also offers boat dives and internships. Located opposite Golden Tulip. Contact Rod Abbotson.

Red Sea Diving Centre (☎ 2022323, 2018969; www.redseadivecentre.com) One of the more long-standing dive centres in Aqaba, it charges about JD25/42 for two dives without/with equipment hire, or JD25 for a single dive with equipment hire. Off King Hussein St.

Royal Diving Club (☎ 2017035; www.rdc.jo) Around 12km south of the city centre. In operation since 1986, this experienced company is very professionally run. Charges start at JD26 for the first dive with equipment (JD40 for two in the same day). A refreshment dive (if you haven't been diving for a year) costs JD37 with equipment, as does a night dive (minimum three people). It's JD255 for the open-water PADI course. All dives are shore dives. Ask about dive programmes for children and people with a disability.

Sea Star (☎ 2014131; Al-Cazar Hotel; www.seastar-watersports.com) Each dive with full equipment and dive master accompaniment costs JD30, while rates decrease the more dives you do. Night dives (extra JD10) are also available with prior notice.

All of the above diving centres can also organise night dives. Underwater camera hire costs around JD10. Other costs include: an underwater torch (flashlight), about JD5 per trip; wetsuits, about JD3,300/6,600 for a short/long one; and fins, about JD1,500.

Most of the diving centres run PADI courses, most commonly a five-day open-water course (JD200 to JD250) or a three-day advanced open-water course (JD180 to

JD200). If you've never been diving you can try an introductory dive under the supervision of a dive master. Most places offer tuition for children. Courses are often run by Europeans who speak English, French, German and/or Italian.

SNORKELLING

All of the diving centres mentioned earlier hire out flippers, mask and snorkel for around JD5 per day.

If you have your own gear and want to go snorkelling away from the beach, ask the diving agencies about the cost of accompanying a scuba-diving trip. Diving staff are generally happy to point out the best snorkelling spots. The cheapest place to snorkel is Club Murjan (JD4 plus equipment), while the Royal Diving Club charges JD7 (plus JD5 for equipment). Arab Divers will hire you snorkelling equipment and drop you off and pick you up at snorkelling sites for JD8.

Aquarium

Part of the Marine Science Station complex, the **aquarium** (☎ 2015145; admission JD2; ☎ 8am-5pm) is quite run down and only worth a visit if you don't get a chance to go diving or snorkelling. The tanks provide a colourful glimpse at coral, moray eels, turtles and stonefish. The aquarium is located about 7.5km south of Aqaba, 500m south of the ferry passenger terminal.

الحوض المائي

Club Murjan

نادي المرجان

About 1.3km south of the Marine Science Station is **Club Murjan** (☎ 2012794), the beach and diving centre run by Al-Cazar Hotel in Aqaba. Guests of the hotel, and divers using the hotel's diving centre, can enjoy the facilities at Club Murjan for no charge, while the public can use the good beach, swimming pool and showers during the day for JD4, including return transport from Al-Cazar Hotel (departures at 9am and 1.30pm). Hire of snorkelling gear costs JD7 per day. Water-sports gear such as canoes and paragliders are also normally available. There is a bar and restaurant on the site.

Aqaba Marine Park Visitors Centre

متنزة العقبة البحري ومركز الزوار

The headquarters of the **marine park** (☎ 203 5801; mpark@aseza-env.gov.jo), around 12km south of Aqaba, has the largest section of free public beach, with sun shades and a jetty, museum, gift shop and park offices. The Al-Sanbouk Café sits here on a moored boat.

There's another large free public **beach** just to the south, with several cafés. Both beaches are near the Japanese Garden and Gorgonian I dive sites and can be very busy on Fridays.

Beach Camps

مخيمات الشاطيء

Bedouin Garden Village (☎ 079 5602521; bedwin.jamal@yahoo.com; per person camping JD2-3, s/d JD15/20, large room JD20/30, meals JD5; 🚻) Beach or dive bums will like this place, located about 10km south of the town centre on the east side of the road. Accommodation is basic, cramped and overpriced, and there is no air-conditioning, but you can camp or park a camper van for cheap. There's a Bedouin tent for hanging out in, a small pool, a dive centre (see p229), restaurant and shared showers for campers and divers. They can arrange Bedouin music performances in the evenings if there are enough people, and hire out snorkelling gear (JD5 per day). A taxi here costs JD2 to JD3.

Other camps, such as the **Mermaid Camp** (☎ 079 5567761) and **Sunset Camp** (☎ 077 7786023; www.sunsetcamp.com; reefdiverjo@yahoo.com) are due to relocate next to the Bedouin Garden Village, to (maybe) create a Dahab-style budget beach community. If that pans out, this will be the place to head for if you are camping, overlanding or just diving on the cheap. The current site of these camps is expected to be developed as a five-star resort.

Tala Bay

تالباي

Located just north of the Royal Diving Club (and about 11km south of Aqaba), **Tala Bay** (☎ 2017222; www.talabay.jo) is an ambitious development project that should start to open during the life of this book. The first phase is for a marina, golf course, five-star and three-star hotels and a water sports club. More hotels (2500 rooms in total), villas, apartments, shops and restaurants will come in the years ahead. Developers are working closely to ensure that it has minimal impact upon the environmental protections demanded by the Red Sea Aqaba Marine Park.

Royal Diving Club

مركز الغوص الوطني

Located about 12km south of Aqaba, and close to the Saudi border, is the **Royal Diving Club** (☎ 2017035; www.rdc.jo), which is an excellent place for swimming, diving and snorkelling. It has a lovely swimming pool, restaurant and a decent beach, where women are able to feel relaxed.

The entrance fee of JD7/3.5 for adults/children (aged five to 12) allows guests to use the facilities. Snorkelling gear costs an extra JD5 per day. Hotels in Aqaba can often arrange entry for JD5, including transport (but without a towel), which is cheaper than just turning up. Entrance and transport is free for anyone scuba diving with the Royal Diving Club (see p229).

Attached to the dive centre is the new **Coral Bay Resort** (☎ 2017035; s/d JD53/63; 🚻), with comfortable, clean and modern rooms, some with sea views. Only the 2nd-floor rooms have a balcony. Divers should be able to negotiate a discount on the room rate, which includes breakfast. Add JD10 for half board.

The minibus provided by the centre picks up guests from outside most of the hotels in Aqaba at 9am, 10am, 11am and noon, and returns at 12.30pm, 3pm, 4pm and 5pm. Ring the Royal Diving Club the day before to arrange a lift. Alternatively take the public minibus from near the Aqaba castle. A private taxi costs around JD4 one way, but it can be difficult to find one going back to Aqaba.

Pharaoh's Island

جزيرة فرعون

This picturesque island (*Jazirat Fara'un* in Arabic) is 15km south of Aqaba, but only a few hundred metres from Taba, in Egypt. It's actually in Egyptian waters, but travelling to or from Egypt this way is not permitted.

Excavations suggest that the island was inhabited as far back as the Bronze Age. The fantastic Crusader **Salah ad-Din Fort** is fun to explore; and there is really good swimming and snorkelling in the lagoon, and diving further out which is only accessible by boat.

Top-end and good midrange hotels can book day trips to the island for JD24 per person, which includes the entrance fee to the island, Egyptian visa, lunch and transport. Two days' notice is often required to allow time for the visas to be processed.