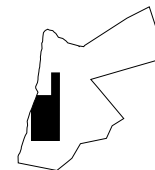


# King's Highway

## الطريق الملوكي



The King's Highway – known in Arabic as At-Tariq as-Sultani (Rd of the Sultan) – is of great historical and religious significance. Over the last 3000 years it has been traversed by the Israelites en route to the Promised Land, Nabataeans to and from Petra, Christian pilgrims to Moses' memorial at Mt Nebo, Crusaders to their castle fortifications and Muslim pilgrims heading to and from Mecca.

These are the ancient lands of Moab and Edom, squeezed between the desert and the Rift Valley and cut by numerous deep and hidden wadis. These hidden valleys, from Wadi Mujib to Wadi Dana, hide some of Jordan's most unexpected scenery and greatest adventures.

Of Jordan's three highways running from north to south, the King's Highway is by far the most interesting and picturesque, with a host of attractions. The highway connects the lovely mosaic town of Madaba to wondrous Petra via the Crusader castles, Roman forts, biblical sites and a windswept Nabataean temple.

The road also traverses some epic landscapes, including the lovely Dana Nature Reserve and the majestic Wadi Mujib valley. Dana in particular is fast becoming a must-stop sight and offers one of the best opportunities to just hang out and do some hiking.

Unfortunately, Wadi Mujib is the reason why public transport along this road can be difficult. If you only hire a car or taxi in one part of Jordan, do it here. A drive along the King's Highway is a veritable ride through the centuries, along the spine of history.

### HIGHLIGHTS

- Consider making the historic small town of **Madaba** (p150) an alternative base to Amman, as you explore its vibrant Byzantine mosaics and nearby sights
- Visit Herod's castle at **Mukawir** (p162), the site where Salome danced and John the Baptist was beheaded
- Explore **Karak** (p165), Jordan's most impressive story-book Crusader castle, complete with moat, dungeons and a keep
- Take a day off and hike, relax and read at **Dana Nature Reserve** (p171), where 21st-century ecotourism meets a 15th-century Ottoman village
- Feel the hair raise on the back of your neck as you descend the pitch-black secret tunnels of the **Shobak** (p173) Crusader fortress
- Enjoy the views of the Promised Land from **Mt Nebo** (p158) – if they were good enough for Moses, then they are good enough for us





### FAST FACTS

- The website **Ancient Routes** ([www.ancientroute.com](http://www.ancientroute.com)) offers a historical route description of the King's Highway
- The King's Highway runs for 297km between Madaba and Petra

chapter by such methods, you would need up to a week.

One option to consider is the transport (minimum three passengers) organised by the Mariam Hotel in Madaba (see p158) or the Palace Hotel and other budget places in Amman (see p87) which runs to Petra in a day, with stops in Wadi Mujib, Karak and, sometimes, Dana and Shobak. Chartering a taxi is also possible for the same journey.

The only alternative is to take a regular minibus from Madaba to Dhiban, charter a taxi to Ariha, then take a minibus to Karak. From Karak minibuses run to Tafila, where you can take another to Qadsiyya (for Dana). Public transport south of Qadsiyya (near Dana) is infrequent, so you may need to take a minibus to Ma'an and then another to Wadi Musa (Petra).

### MADABA

☎ 05 / Pop 50,000

This easy-going town is best known for its superb and historically significant Byzantine-era mosaics. The town has a strong sense of its unique history, making it a major stop on the tourist trail. Madaba is the most important Christian centre in Jordan, and has long been an example of religious tolerance, a place where the Friday call to prayer from the mosque coexists with Sunday church bells; Muslims make up two-thirds of the population, and Christians one-third.

Madaba is compact and easily explored on foot, with some excellent hotels and restaurants, and is less than an hour by regular public transport from Amman, so it's worth considering as an alternative to Amman as a place to stay. It's even possible to come straight by taxi from Queen Alia International Airport, bypassing Amman altogether.

Madaba is also a good base for exploring the Dead Sea, Bethany-Beyond-the-Jordan (Jesus' baptism site; see p141) and

other local sites such as Mt Nebo, Mukawir (Machaerus) and Umm ar-Rasas.

### History

The region around Madaba has been inhabited for around 4500 years. The biblical Moabite town of Medeba was one of the towns divided among the 12 tribes of Israel at the time of the Exodus. It's also mentioned on the famous Meshe Stele, raised in about 850 BC by the Moabite king Mesha (see the boxed text, p165) to commemorate his victory over the Israelites.

By 165 BC the Ammonites were in control of Madaba; about 45 years later it was taken by Hircanus I of Israel, and then promised to the Nabataeans by Hircanus II in return for helping him recover Jerusalem. Under the Romans from AD 106, Madaba became a prosperous provincial town with the usual colonnaded streets and impressive public buildings. The prosperity continued during the Christian Byzantine period, when there was a large drive towards church construction; most of the mosaics in Madaba date from this period.

The town was eventually abandoned for about 1100 years after a devastating earthquake in AD 747. In the late 19th century, 2000 Christians from Karak migrated to Madaba after a bloody dispute with Karak's Muslims and within their community. They found the mosaics when they started digging foundations for houses. News that a mosaic map of the Holy Land had been found in St George's Church in Madaba reached Europe in 1897, leading to a flurry of exploratory activity that continues to this day.

The well-governed town has plans for a restoration project in the town's souq, which might be worth keeping an eye on over the next few years.

### Orientation

#### MAPS

The brochure *Madaba and Mount Nebo*, published by the Jordan Tourism Board (JTB), provides a brief but satisfactory explanation of the attractions in Madaba. It's available at tourist offices and, usually, the visitor centre. The JTB also publishes several smaller brochures: *Madaba Mosaic Map*, which has slightly more detailed information about the mosaics in St George's Church; and the excellent *Mount Nebo* (see p159).

### Information BOOKSHOPS

If you need more information about the mosaics and other historical buildings in Madaba, pick up the definitive but weighty *Madaba: Cultural Heritage* (around JD22), which is published by the American Center of Oriental Research. Much cheaper (JD8) and more portable is the *Mosaic Map of Madaba* by Herbert Donner, with a fold-out picture of the map and detailed text. The best one is the pocket-sized and affordable *Madaba, Mt Nebo* published by Al-Kutba (JD3).

The **bookshop** across from the Burnt Palace sells a good range of current international newspapers.

### EMERGENCY

**Tourist Police Office** (☎ 191; Talal St; ☎ 24hr) Just north of St George's Church.

### INTERNET ACCESS

**Waves Internet** (Talal St; per hr JD1; ☎ 24hr)

### MONEY

**Arab Bank** (Palestine St) Visa and MasterCard. Has an ATM.

**Bank of Jordan** (cnr Palestine & King Abdullah Sts) Changes cash and travellers cheques.

**Housing Bank** (Palestine St) Visa; has an ATM.

**Jordan National Bank** (cnr King Abdullah & Talal Sts) Changes cash and travellers cheques.

### POST

**Post office** (Palestine St; ☎ 8am-5pm) Long-distance telephone calls can be made from inside.

### TOURIST INFORMATION

**Ministry of Tourism & Antiquities** (☎ /fax 3245527; tourism@mota.gov.jo) Has an office above the Burnt Palace for specialised information about Madaba's preservation efforts.

**National Society for the Preservation of Madaba and its Suburbs** (☎ 3244679; Hussein bin Ali St)

Located in front of the Burnt Palace. Possibly worth visiting if you have an interest in what's being done to preserve Madaba's architectural and cultural heritage.

**Visitor Centre** (☎ 3253536; Abu Bakr as-Seddiq St; ☎ 8am-5pm Oct-Apr, to 7pm May-Sep) Adjacent to the Madaba Mosaic School. There is a helpful information office with a few brochures, toilets and a handy car park. Check out the side room of old photos of Madaba, with a map of all the old buildings; look especially for the 1924 photo of a much smaller Madaba.

### Getting Around

Public transport along the King's Highway is neither frequent nor complete, with the stretch between Dhiban and Ariha devoid of any regular public transport. Hitching can be a good way to get around, but be prepared for long waits on deserted stretches. To explore all of the sites covered in this

## Sights

A combined ticket to the Archaeological Park, Madaba Museum and Church of the Apostles costs JD2. Children under 12 are free. There's no student price. It's not possible to purchase cheaper tickets for the individual sites if you only want to visit one.

### ST GEORGE'S CHURCH & MOSAIC MAP

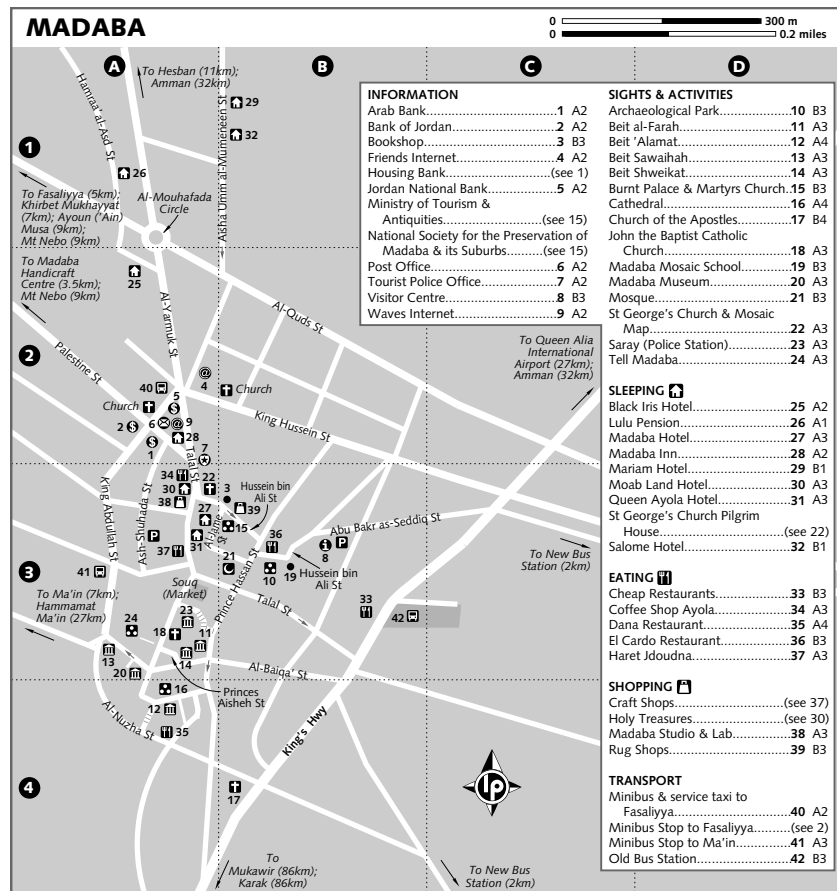
This 19th-century **Greek Orthodox church** (Talal St; admission JD1; ☎ 8am-6pm Sat & Mon-Thu, 10.30am-6pm Fri & Sun) was built over a Byzantine church.

Unearthed in 1884, the mosaic on the church floor was a clear map with 157 captions (in Greek) depicting all the major biblical sites of the Middle East (see opposite). The mosaic was constructed in AD

560, and was originally around 25m long (some experts claim 15m is more accurate) and 6m wide. It once contained more than two million pieces but only one-third of the original mosaic has survived.

The map itself, while of enormous historical significance, can be difficult to take in with all its fragments. It's definitely worth seeing, but you need to take your time to get the map's bearing. A room across from the church displays a full size copy of the map for easier viewing.

Don't forget to check out the rest of the church, including some lovely icons with silver halos, an image of St George (St Giorgis) slaying the dragon, and an embroidered depiction of Jesus' death in the



## NAVIGATING THE MADABA MAP

The first thing to do as you take in the Madaba map is to get orientated. As you look at the map, the map's north is to the left. Thus the Mediterranean is at the far west of the map.

Pride of place is the detailed mini map of Jerusalem, depicting city walls, gates, the central road (cardo) and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in the northeast of the city. South of Jerusalem is Bethlehem (marked in red letters) and Judah. Above Jerusalem are Nablus (Neapolis – the capital of Samaria), Hebron and the oasis of Jericho, surrounded by palm trees.

The central Dead Sea has boats crossing it. The Jordan River is to the side, crossed by cable-drawn ferries and with fish desperately swimming away from the salty water! The site marked as 'Sapsafas' is Bethany-Beyond-the-Jordan, positioned just under a gazelle fleeing a defaced lion. Northeast of the Dead Sea is Herod's spa at Callirhoe (Zara), marked by three springs and two palm trees. Southeast of the sea is Lot's Cave, just above the settlement of Safi (Balak or Zoara), one of the 'Five Cities of the Plain' and marked by more palm trees. The dark line above is Wadi Zered, now known as Wadi Hasa.

The walled city of Karak is at the far eastern edge of the map (ie the top). To the far right, Mt Sinai is recognisable by its coloured mountains; nearby in the far south is the multichannelled Nile Delta. On a mosaic fragment in the far east are the Palestinian and Israeli towns of Gaza and Akkra, finishing off the tour of the Holy Land.

southwest corner. A small shop by the exit sells copies of the map and reproduction Orthodox icons.

On Friday and Sunday morning, the church opens at 7am for mass at which visitors are welcome, but viewing the map at these times is not permitted.

### ARCHAEOLOGICAL PARK

Some careful restoration and excavation in the early 1990s led to the creation of the **Archaeological Park** (☎ 3246681; Hussein bin Ali St; admission combined ticket JD2; ☎ 8am-5pm Oct-Apr, to 7pm May-Sep), a collection of ruins as well as mosaics from the Madaba area.

As you enter, you'll see a 1st-century BC mosaic from Machaerus, which is said to be the oldest mosaic found in Jordan. Follow the walkway to the right, past mosaics from Massuh (10km north of Madaba), then above the Roman street, which ran east to west between the Roman city gates and was lined with columns, to the faded but fine mosaics of the **Church of the Prophet Elias** (built AD 607). Look for the details (such as the fine green bird) and then descend to the earlier crypt (AD 595).

The large roofed central structure in front of you contains the most impressive mosaics on the site. On the north side of the area under the roof is **Hippolytus Hall**, an early-6th-century Byzantine villa. The main border has decorations depicting the four seasons in the four corners, and the lower

section has pictures of flowers and birds. The middle section (divided by the base of a wall) depicts characters from the classic Greek oedipal tragedy of Phaedra and Hippolytus. The upper image shows a topless Aphrodite positioned next to Adonis and spanning a naughty winged Eros. Also here are the Three Graces (three daughters of Zeus, representing joy, charm and beauty) and, in the top left corner, personifications of the towns of Madaba, Rome and Gregoria, beside a couple of sea monsters.

The **Church of the Virgin Mary** was built in the 6th century above the villa and was unearthed under the floor of someone's house in 1887. The central mosaic, thought to date from AD 767, is a masterpiece of geometric design.

Finally, before leaving, there are more mosaics from Madaba and Ma'in, dating from AD 720.

### CHURCH OF THE APOSTLES

This **church** (Al-Nuzha St; admission combined ticket JD2; ☎ 9am-5pm Oct-Apr, 8am-7pm May-Sep) contains a remarkable mosaic dedicated to the 12 apostles, although it can be difficult to see clearly. The embroidery-like mosaic was created in AD 568 and is one of the few instances where the mosaicist (Salomios) put his name to his work. The central portion shows Thalassa, a woman who represents the sea, surrounded by fish and some slippery marine creatures (check out the

comical little octopus). In the same mosaic are representations of less threatening native animals, birds, flowers and fruits, and cherubic faces in the corners.

### MADABA MUSEUM

The **Madaba Museum** (☎ 3244056; Al-Baiqa' St; admission combined ticket JD2; ☎ 8am-4pm Oct-Apr, to 7pm May-Sep) is housed in several old Madaba residences.

The first room to the left has a 6th-century mosaic depicting a naked satyr, which some sources say is Bacchus, the god of wine. The rather naughty image of Ariadne, dancing with cymbals on her hands and feet, has been partially destroyed.

Also here is the **Folklore Museum**, featuring jewellery, traditional costumes and a copy of the Mesha Stele (see p165). Other mosaics in the courtyard depict two rams tied to a tree, a popular image that recalls the biblical tale of Abraham prepared to slaughter his son Isaac.

The last hall features artefacts from Hesban, Umm ar-Rasas and Machaerus castle near Mukawir (see p162).

There have long been plans to move the museum to the Saray (see opposite) but nothing has come of this yet.

### BURNT PALACE & MARTYRS CHURCH

The **Burnt Palace** (Hussein bin Ali St; admission free; ☎ 8am-5pm Sun-Thu Oct-Apr, to 7pm May-Sep) was

a late-6th-century luxury private mansion destroyed by fire and earthquake around AD 749. It contains more mosaics and there are walkways throughout for viewing the site. The **east wing** (down the steps to the left as you enter) contains some good hunting mosaics, while the **west wing's** highlight is the image of a lion attacking a bull. A fragment of a four seasons mosaic is all that remains of the **north wing**. On the site is the continuation of the ancient **Roman road**, which once connected with the road in the Archaeological Park, as well as the 6th-century **Martyrs Church**, which was destroyed in the 8th century. The site requires more imagination than the other sites around town; five minutes should do it.

### MADABA MOSAIC SCHOOL

The **Madaba Mosaic School** (☎ 3240723, Hussein bin Ali St; admission free; ☎ 8am-3pm Sun-Thu) was set up in 1992 by the Jordanian Government and is the only school of its kind in the Middle East. Its primary aims are to train Jordanian artists in the production and restoration of mosaics, spread awareness of mosaics in Jordan and to actively preserve mosaics throughout the country. Its restoration work is evident in the Archaeological Park, the Church of the Apostles and at Khirbet Mukhayyat.

The mosaic school consists of a workshop, which includes a partial reproduction of the mosaic map in St George's Church; it

is displayed on the wall, making it easier to photograph. This is an active school so all visitors should first visit the administration office staff who are usually happy to show visitors around, although the classrooms are understandably off limits.

### TELL MADABA

This important archaeological site in the heart of Madaba is still under excavation and there's not much to see. Like many sites around Madaba, it was discovered by accident by a local when he started digging the foundations for his house. It contains remains of a **Byzantine villa** and parts of an **Iron Age wall** or fortification, the largest of its kind in Jordan and visible from above the arch on the top level.

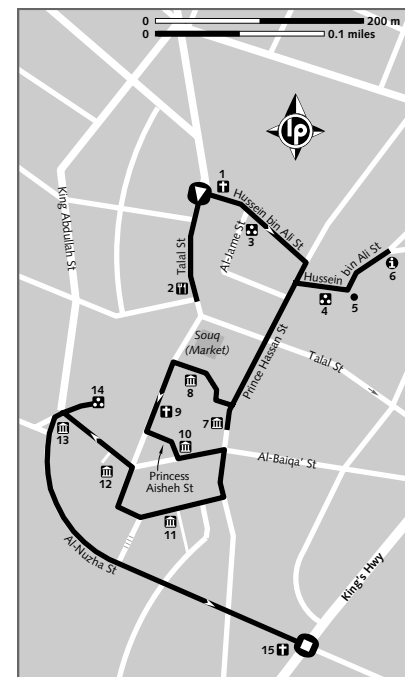
To get the most from this site you'll need a trained eye. For more on the excavations see [www.utoronto.ca/tmap](http://www.utoronto.ca/tmap). Tread carefully as much remains to be excavated.

### Walking Tour

Madaba is compact so all the main attractions can be easily visited on foot. Allow two to three hours for the walk, longer if you want to spend more time admiring the mosaics.

The obvious place to start is **St George's Church** (1; p152), with its mosaic map. From there, head south along Talal St and visit the complex of restaurants and craft shops in **Haret Jdoudna** (2; p157), a wonderfully restored example of traditional Madaba architecture built in 1905. Return north along Talal St, and then turn right (southeast) along Hussein bin Ali St. This takes you to the **Burnt Palace & Martyrs Church** (3; opposite). Further down the hill, at the end of Hussein bin Ali St, turn right (southwest) into Prince Hassan St, then immediately left to reach the **Archaeological Park** (4; p153). Next door is the **Madaba Mosaic School** (5; opposite) and then the **Madaba Visitor Centre** (6; p151). Return to Prince Hassan St and head up the hill, past the new mosque, to the decaying but elegant 1898-1904 **Beit al-Farah** (7) at the corner to the right (west).

For a detour, backtrack up the hill to the solid **Saray** (8; built in 1896 and now the police station) and curve round the building, taking a left, past the **John the Baptist Catholic Church** (9), with its Roman column fragments built into the walls. Turn left onto Princess Aishah St and Al-Baiqa' St,



with the 1916-20 **Beit Shweikat** (10) on the corner. Take a right back onto Prince Hassan St and then another right, passing the 1913-22 **Beit Alamat** (11) to the left (south) and the lonely ruins known as the 'cathedral' on the right. The road curves round to rejoin Al-Baiqa' St.

Down an alley running left (south) off Al-Baiqa' St is the entrance to the **Madaba Museum** (12; opposite). Continue further west along Al-Baiqa' St to the junction with An-Nuzha St where there are some more old houses, including **Beit Sawiahah** (13). Around 50m northeast of the junction, above an open patch of ground, are the ruins of **Tell Madaba** (14; left). Al-Nuzha St then leads south and then southwest, taking you to the junction of the King's Highway, where the **Church of the Apostles** (15; p153) stands.

### Sleeping

Madaba has an excellent range of hotels, almost all run by Arab Christians, and all within easy walking distance of Madaba's main sights. Prices include breakfast and private bathroom unless otherwise noted

### MAKING MOSAICS

Mosaics are traditionally made from tiny squares called tesserae, chipped from larger rocks. The tesserae are naturally coloured, and carefully laid on a thick coating of wet lime and ash. Unlike mosaics found in other countries (eg Italy), mosaics found in and around Madaba were made for the floor, and were hardy enough to withstand anything – except massive earthquakes.

The larger mosaics found in and around Madaba required painstaking effort and great skill, taking months or years to complete. As a result, they were only commissioned by wealthier citizens and for important buildings (particularly churches). For some reason, very few of the artists signed their names on the mosaics, possibly because so many people were involved over many years, although other names are often listed, such as the donors and church clergy.

Designs were fairly standard, copied from pattern books, and featured scenes from everyday life, such as animals, fish, plants and people; activities such as hunting and viniculture; personification of the seasons; and various religious events or mythological Greek and Roman gods and goddesses. It's the details that are so captivating – the bell on a gazelle's neck, the palm trees at an oasis on the Madaba map, or the expression on a person's face. Most were topped off with intricate braided borders and dazzling geometric designs.

Mosaic making continued for the first century of the Muslim Umayyad dynasty but following the Caliph Yazid II's edict against the representation of living beings, many of the mosaics depicting people were sadly destroyed or replaced with white mosaics.

**Mariam Hotel** (☎ 3251529; www.mariamhotel.com; Aisha Umm al-Mumeneen St; s/d/tr JD18/22/26; 📞 📺 📺 📺) The Mariam is doubtless the best place to stay in town, with spotless rooms and bathrooms, good breakfasts, some of the most comfortable beds in Jordan and, best of all, Charl, the superfriendly owner. A swimming pool, bar and poolside restaurant were added in 2005, which makes the place great midrange value. Reservations are recommended. The hotel is located in a quiet residential district, two blocks northeast of the Al-Mouhafada Circle, an easy 10-minute walk from the town centre. Charl can organise a taxi to/from the airport (around JD10) and transport south along the King's Highway to Petra (see p158 or to the Dead Sea (see p158)).

**Salome Hotel** (☎ 3248606; salomeh@wanadoo.jo; Aisha Umm al-Mumeneen St; s/d/tr Sep to mid-Nov & Mar-May JD15/20/25, rest of year JD13/18/22; 📞 📺 📺) Connected to the Mariam next door (it's sometimes used an overspill) this new 17-room hotel is another very comfortable choice.

**Black Iris Hotel** (☎ 3250171; www.blackirishotel.com; Al-Mouhafada Circle; s/d/tr/q JD15/20/27/32) Another friendly family-run place with very reasonable prices, it also comes warmly recommended by readers. The stylish rooms, some overlooking a pleasant garden, have spotless bathrooms and there's also a nice café/reading area. The top-floor quad has its own private roof terrace, which is great in the summer. The hotel is easy to spot from Al-Mouhafada Circle.

**Lulu Pension** (☎ 3243678; fax 3247617; Hamraa' al-Asd St; s/d/tr with shared bathroom JD10/20/30, s/d/t with private bathroom & balcony JD15/25/35) Has a family feel to it, and the rooms are very comfortable and the welcome is warm. The cheaper rooms are in the basement. Guests have access to the satellite TV room and a self-service kitchen that's great for making cups of tea.

**Madaba Hotel** (☎/fax 3240643; Al-Jame St; s/d with shared bathroom from JD7/12, s/d with private bathroom JD8/15) This is the best budget option, with clean, simple rooms and a friendly family feel. The shared bathrooms are spotless, with hot water in the morning and evening, and there's a ground floor lounge and kitchen that guests can use. In summer you can probably sleep in the rooftop Bedouin tent (JD3). Breakfast costs JD1.

**Moab Land Hotel** (☎/fax 3251318; moablandhotel@wanadoo.jo; Talal St; s/d JD15/20 high season Sep-Nov,

Mar-Apr JD20/25, suite JD30) Directly opposite St George's Church, this place is run by a Greek Orthodox family. It's an attractive, clean and airy place, staff are friendly and the location is excellent. Rooms are warm and cosy. In summer savour a slow breakfast on the great rooftop terrace. The reception is on the upper floor.

**Queen Ayola Hotel** (☎/fax 3244087; Talal St; s/d with shared bathroom JD10/17, with private bathroom JD12/20) Rooms here vary and the price does not always match the quality, so try to have a look at several rooms. It lacks the family-run charm of Madaba's other hotels; if you can afford a few dinars more, there's better elsewhere.

**Madaba Inn** (☎ 3259003; www.madabainn.com; Talal St) This brand-new 33-room hotel had not yet opened at the time of research but should provide a central midrange option, said to be managed by Grand Palace Amman.

**St George's Church Pilgrim House** (☎ 3244984; Talal St; per person JD7) Christian pilgrims are the core clientele in this hostel but staff are generally happy to take in stray tourists. Rooms are simple but very clean, with fresh sheets and a towel, and you get a small but clean private bathroom with hot water. Some rooms have a church view.

## Eating & Drinking

Most of Madaba's restaurants serve alcohol and there are liquor stores dotted around the town.

**Coffee Shop Ayola** (☎ 3251843; Talal St; snacks around JD1; ☎ 8am-11pm) Almost opposite St George's Church, this is a charming, relaxed place that caters to both tourists and locals. It serves delicious toasted sandwiches (JD1), all types of coffee (500 fils to JD1), tea (500 fils) and cans of cold beer (JD1.500). It's also a good place to spend time with a nargileh (water pipe).

**Dana Restaurant** (☎ 3245749; Al-Nuzha St; starters 500-750 fils, mains JD3-4; ☎ 9am-11pm) Not far from the Church of the Apostles, the atmosphere here is pleasant, though can be deathly quiet in the evenings. When there's a group around they serve lunch (sometimes dinner) buffets (JD4); at other times the owners recommend the *sajieh*, a baked dish of chicken, onion and bread (JD4).

**El Cardo Restaurant** (☎ 3251006; Hussein bin Ali St; starters JD1-2, mains JD5, buffet JD5; ☎ 8am-midnight) Opposite the Archaeological Park, the food

here is determined by the presence, or lack of, a tour group; ie either a lunchtime buffet or slim pickings (grilled). A large bottle of Amstel costs JD3. The décor is attractive and the service good.

**Haret Jdoudna** (☎ 3248650; Talal St; starters from 800 fils, mains JD4-7, pizzas JD2-4, plus 26% tax; ☎ 9am-midnight) A classy complex of craft shops (below), cafés, bars, pizzerias and restaurants, all set in one of Madaba's restored old houses. The food is a notch above the standard, with interesting mezze such as *mutaffi bethanjan* (fried eggplant with sesame), good *fatteh* (fried bread with garlicky yoghurt and hummus, sometimes with chicken) and *sawani* (meat or vegetables cooked on trays in a wood-burning oven), and dessert specials like the pastry flakes and walnuts served with pistachio ice cream (JD2). You can sit either indoors or in the pleasant courtyard, though either way the service borders on the indifferent. There is a small bar (wine JD2.500 a glass) and live music from 9pm.

For cheap *felafel*, *shwarma* and chicken places try the King's Highway opposite the former bus station.

There's little going on in Madaba after dark, except drinks in the bar at Haret Jdoudna or poolside at the Mariam Hotel.

## Shopping

Madaba is famous for its colourful rugs, which can be bought around town (especially between the entrance to the Burnt Palace and St George's Church) although much of what's on offer comes from elsewhere. There are plenty of souvenir shops in the area.

Next to the entrance to the Burnt Palace, the National Society for the Preservation of Madaba and its Suburbs (p151) has a necessarily long sign and friendly staff. The organisation aims to preserve Madaba's heritage, with a particular focus on protecting the architectural and historical integrity of the old houses around town. It's partly funded by the sale of maps, books and souvenirs from its shop. Opening hours are erratic.

**Craft shops** (☎/fax 3248650; Haret Jdoudna complex, Talal St; ☎ 9am-9pm) Have a classy and extensive range of items on offer, including jewellery, books, clothing, mosaics, furniture, textiles and ceramics. Most items come from local nonprofit organisations such as the Noor Al-Hussein Foundation (see p248).

Embroidered items come from the Arab Cultural Society, which supports Jordanian war widows. There's a small silversmiths on site.

**Holy Treasures** (☎ 3248481; Talal St) Opposite St George Church, this showroom has an expensive but extensive range of good quality Dead Sea products.

**Madaba Studio & Lab** (☎ 3245932; Talal St; ☎ 8am-9.30pm) One of the better places for developing film. It charges JD5 to develop 36 prints, and sells print film (from JD2.500 for 36 shots), slide film (JD7), memory cards and video cartridges (from JD5). It's near the Moab Land Hotel.

The Madaba Handicraft Centre is a tour group stop 3.5km outside Madaba, on the road to Mt Nebo. It's worth a stop if you have a car and are interested in some shopping.

## Getting There & Away

The new bus station, 2km east of the King's Highway, opened in 2005. A taxi to the station costs around JD1 and minibuses and/or service taxis run there from the King's Highway.

There are several attractions that are located around Madaba, but most (with the exception of Mt Nebo and Mukawir) are time-consuming to reach by public transport. If you don't have time to wait around for infrequent minibuses, charter a taxi in Madaba. A half-day trip (JD20 to JD25) could take in Mt Nebo, Khirbet Mukhayyat, Ayoun Musa and Hammamat Ma'in. A full day (around JD35) could also take in Mukawir, Umm ar-Rasas and Wadi Mujib.

## TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

If you want to bypass the bustle of Amman, it's possible to reach Madaba from Queen Alia International Airport, although there is no public transport. Private taxis cost around JD12, but most hotels in Madaba can arrange a taxi from the airport for JD10 if you notify them in advance.

## TO/FROM AMMAN

From Raghadan, Wahadat and, less often, Abdali bus stations in Amman, there are regular buses and minibuses (350 fils, one hour) throughout the day for Madaba. Minibuses return to Amman until around 9pm (earlier on Fridays), though check which bus station in Amman they are headed to.

### TO/FROM THE DEAD SEA

Minibuses also leave from the Madaba bus/minibus station to Shuneh al-Janubiyeh (South Shuna; 350 fils, 45 minutes), from where you can catch another minibus to Suweimah (250 fils, 30 minutes). Returning to Madaba, you'll need to take a minibus (before 5pm) for Amman and ask the driver to let you out just before Na'ur, from where a minibus will take you to Madaba (total of JD1.250, 1½ hours).

Charl of Mariam Hotel can often organise a taxi tour to Bethany-Beyond-the-Jordan, Amman Beach on the Dead Sea and the Dead Sea Panorama complex for around JD20 (JD18 without Bethany), with an hour stop at each sight. Ask at the hotel if there are enough passengers to warrant a trip.

With the completion of a new road connecting Mt Nebo with the Dead Sea, it is possible to visit Mt Nebo, the Dead Sea and Bethany-Beyond-the-Jordan in a long day, returning to Madaba in the evening, although you'd have to hitch sections (including the 6km to/from Bethany and from Suweimah to Amman Beach).

For those with their own transport, the new (2005) Dead Sea Parkway road offers a useful and scenically dramatic new route to the Dead Sea from Madaba, linking the Dead Sea resorts and Hammamat Ma'in spa to the King's Highway.

### SOUTH ALONG THE KING'S HIGHWAY

Public transport along the King's Highway is patchy and, across Wadi Mujib between Dhiban and Ariha, nonexistent. One worthwhile option is to take the service organised by the Mariam Hotel (you don't have to be staying there). Leaving at 10am, it goes to Petra (arriving around 6pm), with stops at Wadi Mujib for photos, and an hour in Karak. You can get off at Dana, but you'll have to pay the full fare. The service requires a minimum of three people (the hotels ring around Madaba to find other passengers) and costs JD13 per person.

The only alternative is to take a minibus to Dhiban (250 fils, 45 minutes) and then charter a taxi across to Ariha.

### TO/FROM ELSEWHERE

It is possible to travel to Karak on a daily minibus (JD1.500, two hours) from the

main bus station, although it travels via the less interesting Desert Highway. The bus, which usually leaves sometime after 6am, is the university bus for Mu'tah, but it stops at (or close to) the minibus station in Karak. Be aware, however, that although this minibus claims to run daily, it often doesn't operate when the university is on holidays so check the day before you want to travel.

From the bus station in Madaba, minibuses go to Mukawir (for Machaerus castle; 350 fils, one hour) several times throughout the day, the last at around 5pm.

See p160 for details of getting to and from Mt Nebo.

### Getting Around

If you're laden with bags, private taxis are plentiful; from the new bus station to the centre of town costs JD1.

If you are driving, avoid the central area with its fiendish one-way system. Parking is available at the visitor centre.

### MT NEBO

جبل نبو

Go up unto...Mount Nebo in Moab, across from Jericho, and view Canaan, the land I am giving the Israelites as their own possession. There on the mountain that you have climbed you will die.

(Deuteronomy 32:49-50).

**Mt Nebo** (admission JD1; ☞ 7am-5pm Oct-Apr, to 7pm May-Sep) is where Moses is said to have seen the Promised Land, a land he was himself forbidden to enter. He died (aged 120) and was later buried in the area, although the exact location of the burial site is the subject of conjecture. The site flickered briefly into the international spotlight with the visit of Pope John Paul II in 2000.

The Mt Nebo region features several peaks, including Siyagha ('monastery' in Aramaic and the modern Arabic name for the site) – known to the Greeks as Mt Pisgah – on which the Moses Memorial Church was built. It's a pleasant side trip from Madaba, just 9km away, and some readers rate the mosaics here as better than those at Madaba. Aside from its religious significance, Mt Nebo commands sweeping views of the ancient lands of Gilead, Judah, Jericho and the Negev – the Promised Land.

### History

The existence of the church was first reported by a Roman nun, Etheria, who made a pilgrimage to the site in AD 393. This original three-apsed church was quite modest and only a fraction of the size of what you see today. A nave was added in the 5th century, the first baptistry chapel (with the mosaic) was added in AD 530 and the main basilica was completed in AD 597. It was during this time that a large Byzantine monastery was built surrounding the church.

By this time Nebo had grown into an important pilgrimage site and a turn-off to the site was marked on the main Roman road through the region (a Roman mile marker lays in the church courtyard). Byzantine pilgrims would travel to Jerusalem, Jericho, Bethany, Ayoun Musa and Mt Nebo, before descending to Hammamat Ma'in for some serious post-pilgrimage soaking.

The church was abandoned by the 16th century and the modern site was relocated using 4th- and 5th-century pilgrim travelogues. The Franciscans bought the site in 1932 and have excavated most of the ruins of the church and the monastery, as well as reconstructing much of the basilica.

### Information

The entrance to the complex is clearly visible on the Madaba to Dead Sea road, next to a huge new shopping and parking complex. Next to the entrance are some toilets and there's a permanent tourist police pres-

ence. Smoking and mobile phones are not allowed in the complex.

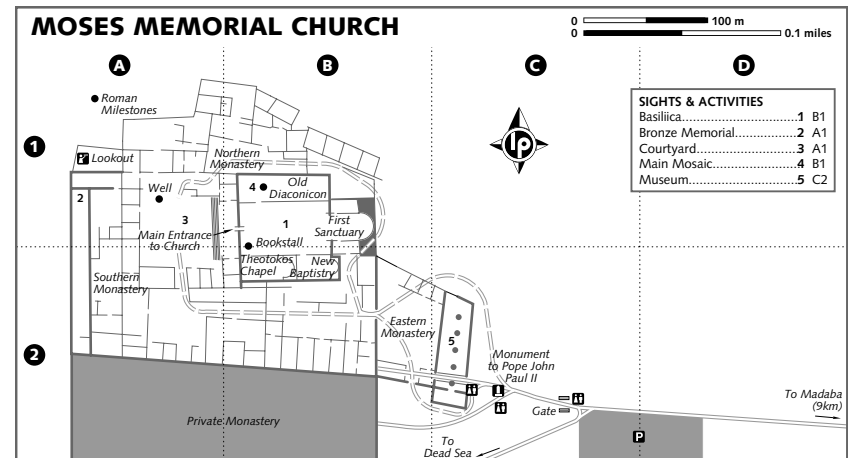
The hefty *Town of Nebo* by Fr Sylvestre J Salter and Fr Bellarmiro Bagatti also details other Christian sites in Jordan and is a good reference. More portable and affordable (JD4) is *Mount Nebo* by Michelle Piccirillo. Both are usually available inside the church. The two brochures published by the Jordan Tourism Board – *Madaba and Mt Nebo* and especially *Mount Nebo* – are very informative and available at the tourist office in Madaba. The encyclopaedic *Mosaics of Madaba* is on display inside the church.

### Sights

Before you get to the **Moses Memorial Church** pop into the **museum**, which has a good collection of mosaics from around Nebo and a 3-D map of the area. From here, walk round to the back of the church.

As you enter the **basilica**, the nave and specifically the presbytery straight ahead mark the oldest section of the church, which was built around 4th-century foundations in AD 597. Pilgrims light candles near the altar as they have done on and off now for some 1500 years. Next to the altar is the lovely mosaic of a braided cross.

To the left is the Diaconicon/baptistry and the exceptionally well preserved main **mosaic** (AD 530), measuring about 9m by 3m. This mosaic is yet another quite remarkable work of patient artistry, depicting hunting and herding scenes interspersed



with an assortment of African fauna, including a zebu (humped ox), lions, tigers, bears, boars, zebras, an ostrich on a leash and a camel-shaped giraffe. The inscription below names the artist.

The newer **baptistry** to the southeast has smaller mosaics, with a fine image of a gazelle and some pomegranate trees.

From the **lookout** at the back (west) of the **courtyard**, the views across the valleys to the Dead Sea, Jericho, the Jordan River and Jerusalem (just 46km away), are superb, but they're often concealed by the haze and pollution. A direction finder points you in the right direction.

Nearby, a huge Italian-designed **bronze memorial** symbolises the suffering and death of Jesus on the cross and the serpent that 'Moses lifted up' in the desert.

There is little else to see around the complex except the ruins of part of the original monastery. Some of the complex is part of a functioning monastery and is, therefore, off limits to visitors.

To enjoy the views away from the crowds, pack a picnic and hike along the road downhill from the site for 100m and take the track to the left to the nearby hilltop.

## Eating

For food, head about 1km back along the road towards Madaba where there are a few restaurants including the recommended **Siagha Restaurant** (☎ 3250226; mains JD2-5).

## Getting There & Away

From Madaba shared taxis run to the mosque at Fasaliyya, for 150 fils a seat. For an extra JD1 or so the service will drop you at Mt Nebo, 3km further.

A return trip in a private taxi from Madaba, with about 30 minutes to look around, shouldn't cost more than JD4 per vehicle.

From Mt Nebo the road continues down for 17km into the Jordan Valley to meet the main Amman-Dead Sea highway, offering excellent views over the valley. There's not much public transport but is a good short cut if you have a car.

## AROUND MT NEBO

### Khirbet Mukhayyat

خربة مخيط

The village of Khirbet Mukhayyat marks the original site of ancient Nebo village, as mentioned on the 9th-century-BC Mesha

Stele (see p165) and in the Bible. Also here is the **Church of SS Lot and Procopius**, which was originally built in AD 557. Inside this unremarkable building is a remarkable **mosaic**, with scenes of daily life, such as agriculture, fishing and wine-making (the cutting and carrying of grapes). If the church is closed look for the gatekeeper, who lives only a few hundred metres away – a 500 fils tip is appreciated.

On top of a nearby hill lie the obvious ruins of the earlier **Church of St George**. Built in AD 536, very little of the church remains and it's officially off limits to tourists.

The turn-off to Khirbet Mukhayyat is well signposted ('Al-Makhyt') to the south, about 6km from Madaba and about 3km before reaching the church complex at Mt Nebo. A good road leads 2.5km into the village, but the final 100m to the Church of SS Lot and Procopius is steep. There is no regular public transport to the village or the churches and hitching requires patience, though it's not a bad walk. If you have chartered a taxi to Mt Nebo, pay a little more (around JD2 extra) for a side trip to Khirbet Mukhayyat.

## Ayoun ('Ain) Musa

عين موسى

Ayoun Musa ('Spring of Moses') is one of two places where the great man is believed to have obtained water by striking a rock (see also p196). The scrappy site is disfigured by a ruined water plant building and there's little to see except the low-lying **ruins** of a couple of churches nearby.

The obvious turn-off to the right (north) is about 1km before the church at Mt Nebo and opposite the Siagha Restaurant. There is no public transport to the site, and hitching is almost impossible. A trip can be combined with a visit to Mt Nebo by chartered taxi, although the switch-backing 2.4km road down to Ayoun Musa is steep and potholed and taxi drivers are reluctant to go along this road unless given substantial financial incentive. Walking down from the main road is easy; coming back is a killer.

## HESBAN

حسبان

Amateur archaeologists will like **Tell Hesban** (admission free; ☎ daylight hr), 11km north of Madaba. Over the last few thousand years this strategic hill has been a Bronze Age settlement, an Amorite capital (900-500 BC),

a Hellenistic fortress (198-63 BC), a Roman settlement called Esbus (63 BC-AD 350), a Byzantine ecclesiastical centre (AD 350-650), an Umayyad market town (650-750), a regional capital of the Abbasids (750-1260) and Mamluks (1260-1500) and, finally, an Ottoman village. All these layers of history are on view, albeit faintly.

The site is well signed, and you can make out multiple layers of history, including a Byzantine church (the mosaics are displayed in Madaba), a Roman temple and the remains of Hellenistic fort. There are lots of caves and cisterns both here and in neighbouring Wadi Majar. The largest Bronze Age cave can be explored with a torch (flashlight).

Travellers recommend the local caretaker, Abo Nour, who is very knowledgeable about the site. You can locate him in the graffiti-covered house next to the site. Read up on the site beforehand at [www.hesban.org](http://www.hesban.org).

Minibuses run frequently from Madaba (100 fils, 20 minutes) to Hesban or otherwise take a taxi for JD2.500. The tell is right by the road; at the central junction head up the hill, taking an early right and then swinging around the back of the hill. Any minibuses headed north can take you to Amman.

## HAMMAT MA'IN

حمامات ماعين (زرقاء ماعين)

☎ 05

About 60 thermal springs have been discovered in the area south and west of Madaba, of which the most famous is **Hammamat Ma'in** (admission per person JD5, per vehicle JD5; ☎ 6am-midnight), which has been developed into a hot-springs resort. The water is hot (at least 45°C), and contains potassium, magnesium and calcium, among other minerals.

## Information

The complex at Hammamat Ma'in was run for a time by the French Mercure group but has been taken over by a Saudi company, so facilities and prices were in flux at the time of research.

Day-trippers are welcome to use (free of charge after paying the entrance fee) the Roman baths, the family pool at the base of the waterfall closest to the entrance, and the swimming pool. Visitors are in theory not allowed to bring food and drink into the complex.

## Sights & Activities

There are two main baths open to the public. The **Roman baths** have clean indoor hot baths (separate for men and women). There is also a small **family pool** beneath a waterfall, which is one of the first signs to the right as you come down the hill from the gate. In general this pool is restricted to women, families or couples, although this is often not enforced. The water is over 60°C when it leaves its underground spring, but is closer to 50°C by the time it tumbles down the rock. There is a small cave behind the cascading water.

There is also a large, clean cold-water **swimming pool** (☎ closed Oct-Apr) that often closes around 4pm. There is a larger and very picturesque hot-water waterfall immediately to the right (north) of the hotel, but visitors are discouraged from climbing up to it.

The **spa** is part of the resort, and you can expect a range of treatments including mud-wrapping, jet showers, hydrotherapy treatment, massages, hydrojet beds and beauty treatments.

It should be possible to **hike** from the springs down the steep Wadi Zarga Ma'in to the Herodus Spring on the Dead Sea Highway. Trails are in theory controlled by the Mercure resort, which charges for a guide and provisions.

## Sleeping & Eating

There are two sleeping options inside the complex, both of which are administered by the resort. The choice is between the main **Ma'in Spa Hotel** (☎/fax 3245500) and a cheaper group of attached chalets.

For meals, your only option is the resort restaurant, which looks out onto the main waterfall. There are (sometimes) snacks and soft drinks available next to the Roman baths.

## Getting There & Away

Although just 4km from the Dead Sea Highway, the main access road is from Madaba, 27km to the northeast. If you're driving, the last 4km descent into Hammamat Ma'in is scenic but very steep, so use a low gear.

From Madaba, minibuses regularly go to Ma'in village (200 fils, 15 minutes), from where you'll have to hitch the remaining 22km (traffic is light except on Fridays). Alternatively take a taxi from Madaba (JD6

one way, or JD12 to JD15 for a return journey, including around an hour's waiting time). Remember that if your taxi enters the gate (from where it's a 300m walk down the hill to the start of the complex), you'll have to fork out JD5 for the car to enter.

## DEAD SEA PANORAMA

This lovely new complex has absorbing views over the Dead Sea and offers a great new route to the sea from the King's Highway. Sunset is a particularly good time to visit. At any time you'll need your own transport.

The **Dead Sea Museum** (☎ 7.30am-4.30pm) is an excellent introduction to the geology, history and environment of the Dead Sea. A **restaurant** is due to open here in early 2006. The complex is just about at sea level.

The complex is 2km west of the turn-off down to Hammamat Ma'in, along a new road opened in 2005 to connect the Desert Highway with the Dead Sea. No public transport runs along the road. The new road makes it possible to make a day trip loop from Madaba, via Hammamat Ma'in, the Panorama Complex, the Dead Sea, Bethany and Mt Nebo, either by hired car or taxi (JD 20 through Charl at the Mariam Hotel – see p158).

## MUKAWIR (MACHAERUS)

مكاوير (مكاريس)

📍 05

Just beyond the village of Mukawir (pronounced Mu-kar-wir) is the spectacular 700m-high hilltop perch of Machaerus, the castle of Herod the Great. The hill was first fortified in about 100 BC, and expanded by Herod the Great in 30 BC. The ruins themselves are of minor interest, but the setting is breathtaking and commands great views out over the impossibly steep surrounding hills and the Dead Sea. Most days you'll even have the place to yourself. Machaerus is known locally as Qala'at al-Meshneq (Castle of the Gallows).

Machaerus is renowned as the place where John the Baptist was beheaded by Herod Antipas, the successor to Herod the Great. John the Baptist had denounced Herod Antipas' marriage to his brother's wife, Herodias, as Jewish law forbade a man marrying his brother's wife while he lived. Bewitched by his stepdaughter Salome's skill as a dancer, the king promised to grant

her anything she wished. To take revenge on the Baptist, Herodias told her daughter to ask for his head on a platter:

And she went out, and said to her mother, "What shall I ask?" And she said, "The head of John the Baptist."  
(Mark 6:24)

So, at the request of Salome, John was killed at Herod's castle, Machaerus. Provocative Salome has inspired painters and writers alike over the centuries.

There is nowhere to stay in Mukawir and only a few basic grocery stores, so bring your own provisions.

## Sights

From the car park, a stone staircase leads down to the main path along the path of an old viaduct. Shortly after the path starts to climb, a small path leads around the main hill to the right. It leads past a number of **caves**, one of which legend says is where the gruesome execution took place, although it's not labelled. You take this path at your peril as it's uneven, often covered with loose stones and narrow.

The main landscaped path is much safer and winds all the way up to the **castle**. At the top, the modest ruins are unlabelled. The reconstructed columns southwest of the deep cistern mark the site of Herod Antipas' **palace triclinium**; this is the site where Salome danced. You should also be able to make out the low-lying remains of the eastern **baths** and defensive **walls**.

The Romans built a **siege ramp** on the western side of the hill when taking the fort from Jewish rebels in AD 72 and the remains are still visible.

The castle is about 2km past Mukawir village and easy to spot.

## Activities

This is a great area for **hiking**, with plenty of shepherds' trails snaking along the valley walls. One particularly worthwhile track leads steeply down the west side of the castle hill from the top and along a ridge line towards the Dead Sea. The views are magnificent, particularly at sunset.

It's also possible to follow the shepherds' trails (or the 4WD road) down to the hot springs at Hammamat Ma'in. You must ex-

ercise extreme caution if taking any of these trails as the terrain falls steeply away and many paths are only for the sure-footed. Women in particular should never hike alone.

You can arrange with the Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature (RSCN) to hike from Mukawir through the Wadi Mujib Nature Reserve to Zara/Herodus Hot Springs; see p147.

## Shopping

At the end of the village, and the start of the road to the castle, is a weaving centre and gallery, a women's cooperative run by the Bani Hamida Centre (see the boxed text below). Visitors are always welcome to look around the small **showroom** (☎ 8am-3pm Sun-Thu) where some of the fine woven products are on sale. The women who run it speak little English, but are keen to help and show how the weaving is done. They also have a display video that shows many of the skills used by the women who work as part of the cooperative.

## Getting There & Away

From outside the bus/minibus station in Madaba, minibuses (350 fils, one hour) go frequently to the village of Mukawir, via Libb (the last around 5pm).

Unless you've chartered a taxi from Madaba, you'll probably need to walk the remaining 2km (a pleasant downhill stroll most of the way) to the castle. Otherwise, your minibus driver may, if you ask nicely (and sweeten the request with a tip), take you the extra distance. Return traffic between the castle car park and the village borders on the nonexistent. The best way

to visit is in your own car, allowing you to take as long as you want to explore the surrounding hills and even pause for a picnic.

## UMM AR-RASAS

أم الرصاص

Umm ar-Rasas, 32km from Madaba, is thought to be the village of **Kastron Mefaa**, mentioned in the Bible as the Roman military outpost of Mephaath. It was designated as a Unesco World Heritage site in 2004.

A shed hangs over the main ruins of the **Church of St Stephen** (admission free; ☎ 8am-5pm), one of four churches in the original village. Inside the shed are some marvellous **mosaics** dating back to about AD 785. The main mosaic clearly depicts hunting, fishing and agriculture, scenes of daily life (such as boys enjoying a boat ride), and the names of those who helped pay for the mosaic. A panel consisting of 10 cities in the region includes Umm ar-Rasas, Philadelphia (Amman), Madaba, Esbounta (Hesban), Belemounta (Ma'in), Areopolis (Ar-Rabba) and Charac Moaba (Karak). A northern panel depicts Jerusalem, Nablus, Casearea, Gaza and others. The edges of the mosaic are particularly decorative.

By the end of 2006 a new visitor centre and shelter over the church should be in place, most likely along with an entry fee.

Beyond are the expansive ruins of **Kastron Mefaa** village, with another four churches and impressive city walls. Arches rise up randomly from the rubble like sea monsters and you can spot cisterns and door lintels everywhere, but a lack of signposts makes it hard to grasp the structure of the town.

About 1.5km north of the ruins is an enigmatic 15m-tall **stone tower**, the purpose of

## THE BANI HAMIDA STORY

One of the several organisations in Jordan that sell handicrafts to fund local community development projects (see p248) is Bani Hamida, named after a group of people who settled in the remote village of Mukawir.

Created under the auspices of the Save the Children Fund, with the continuing assistance of the Canadian and US governments and now administered by the Jordan River Valley Foundation, the Weaving Project Center & Gallery was established in Mukawir. Its aims included reviving traditional weaving practices, raising money for the development of villages in the area and improving the independence of local women. The project now employs over 1400 women who work in the gallery at Mukawir, or at home in one of the 12 nearby villages.

Some of the items available for sale both here and at the Jordan River Foundation shop in Amman (see p98) include pottery, baskets, jewellery, rugs, cushions and bags. Most of the items are created using traditional looms and are coloured with natural dyes.



which baffles archaeologists because there are no stairs inside but several windows at the top. It was most likely a retreat for a stylite, a group of Christian hermits, popular at the time, who lived in seclusion on the top of pillars. Crosses decorate the side of the tower and several ruined monastery buildings lie nearby.

As part of the development of facilities at Umm ar-Rasas, a new museum is to be built at the archaeological site of **Lehun** (or Lejjun), a garrison town built a few kilometres away in AD 300 to house the 4th Roman Legion, and part of a line of Roman forts called the Limes Arabicus which defended the remotest borders of Rome. The site is 7km east of Dhiban and might be worth checking out once the complex is finished in 2006. See the website [www.lehun-excavations.be](http://www.lehun-excavations.be) for details.

### Getting There & Away

A few minibuses go directly to Umm ar-Rasas, via Nital, from the bus/minibus station in Madaba. Alternatively, catch anything going to Dhiban, and hitch a ride from there. Another option is to charter a private taxi from the obvious turn-off at the roundabout in the middle of Dhiban, but taxi drivers can demand as much as JD5/7 one way/return, including waiting time. Umm ar-Rasas is also accessible from the Desert Highway by private or chartered vehicle.

The Church of St Stephen isn't signposted from the village. Take the dirt track beside the post office for 500m to the site. The post office is 500m north of the T-junction of the road between the King's and Desert Highways and the signposted road leading north to Nital.

### WADI MUJIB GORGE وادي الموجيب

Stretching across Jordan from the Desert Highway to the Dead Sea (covering a distance of over 70km) is the vast and beautiful Wadi Mujib gorge, rather optimistically known as the 'Grand Canyon of Jordan'. Aside from being spectacular, it is also significant as the historic boundary between the ancient Amorites (to the north) and the Moabites (to the south). Moses is also believed to have walked through Wadi Mujib, when it was known as the Arnon Valley.

Don't confuse the Wadi Mujib gorge here with the Wadi Mujib Nature Reserve (see p146), which lies further downstream and is normally accessed from the Dead Sea Highway.

The canyon, which is 1km deep and 4km from one edge to the other, is definitely worth seeing even if you don't intend going further south to Karak along the King's Highway. Although the canyon is only 4km wide, the road takes 18km to cross the gorge.

**Dhiban** is the last town you'll pass through (if coming from the north) before you begin the descent down into Wadi Mujib. Once the powerful town of Diban, the capital of an empire carved out by King Mesha in the 9th century BC, Dhiban is where the Mesha Stele was discovered (see opposite). There is nothing left of the ancient city.

About 3km down (south) from Dhiban is an awesome **lookout** over Wadi Mujib. To admire the views without crossing the valley, walk (or charter a taxi) to the lookout from Dhiban. At the bottom of the valley the main road crosses the large Mujib dam before winding up the far side in a series of switchbacks.

At the point where you will start to again breathe easy after negotiating the perilous climb, you will see the strategically placed **Trajan Rest House** (☎ 079 5903302; bed in shared room JD3, with breakfast & dinner JD10), which is also signed as 'Trajan Restaurant'. The restaurant only serves open buffets for tour groups but you can get hot and cold drinks and breakfast (dinner can be arranged if you are staying overnight) here. The accommodation here is basic, with curtains for doors. It is a good place to hitch a ride down into the valley.

**Ariha** is the first village you'll reach as you climb up the southern wall of Wadi Mujib, although the village is about 2.5km off the main King's Highway.

### Getting There & Away

Dhiban is where almost all transport south of Madaba stops. At the moment, the only way to cross the mighty Wadi Mujib from Dhiban to Ariha (about 30km) is to charter a taxi for JD4 each way. Finding a taxi in Ariha is a lot harder. Bargain hard. Hitching is possible, but you can expect a long wait.

### A STELE AT TWICE THE PRICE

The original Mesha Stele was found by a missionary at Dhiban in 1868. It was a major discovery because it not only provided historical detail of the battles between the Moabites and the kings of Israel, but was also the earliest example of Hebrew script to be unearthed. After surviving intact from about 850 BC (when it was raised by King Mesha of Moab to let everyone know of his successes against Israel) to AD 1868, it quickly came to a rather unfortunate end.

After finding the stele, the missionary reported it to Charles Clermont-Ganneau at the French consulate in Jerusalem who then made a mould of it and went back to Jerusalem to raise the money which he had offered the locals for it. While he was away, the local families argued over who was going to get the money and some of the discontented lit a fire under the stone and then poured water over it, causing it to shatter. Although most pieces were recovered, inevitably some were lost. The remnants were gathered together and shipped off to France, and the reconstructed stone is now on display in the Louvre in Paris. Copies can be seen in the museums at Amman, Madaba and Karak.

### KARAK

📍 03 / Pop 20,000

The ancient Crusader stronghold of Karak (or Kerak) lies within the walls of the old city and is one of the highlights of Jordan. The fortified castle that dominates the town was a place of legend in the battles between the Crusaders or Franks and the Islamic armies of Saladin (Salah ad-Din). Now among the most famous, the castle at Karak was just one in a long line built by the Crusaders stretching from Aqaba in the south to Turkey in the north.

Often ignored by travellers speeding south towards Petra, Karak is worth the effort to get here.

### History

Karak lies on the route that ancient caravans travelled from Egypt to Syria in the time of the biblical kings, and was also used by the Greeks and Romans. The city is mentioned several times in the Bible as Kir, Kir Moab and Kir Heres, capital of the Moabites, and later emerges as a Roman provincial town, Charac Moaba. The city also features on the famous mosaic in St George's Church in Madaba.

The arrival of the Crusaders launched the city back into prominence and the Crusader king Baldwin I of Jerusalem had the castle built in AD 1142. Even today, its commanding position and strategic value are obvious, and stands midway between Shobak and Jerusalem. It became the capital of the Crusader district of Oultrejourdain and, with the taxes levied on passing caravans and food grown in the district, helped Jerusalem prosper.

### الكرك

The castle was passed on to the de Milly family and through marriage fell into the sadistic hands of Renaud de Chatillon who delighted in torturing prisoners and throwing them off the walls into the valley 450m below; he even went to the trouble of having a wooden box fastened over their heads so they wouldn't lose consciousness before hitting the ground. Hated by Saladin for his treachery, de Chatillon had arrived from France in 1148 to take part in the Crusades and from Karak he was able to control the trade routes to Egypt and Mecca, thereby severely disrupting the supply lines of the Islamic armies.

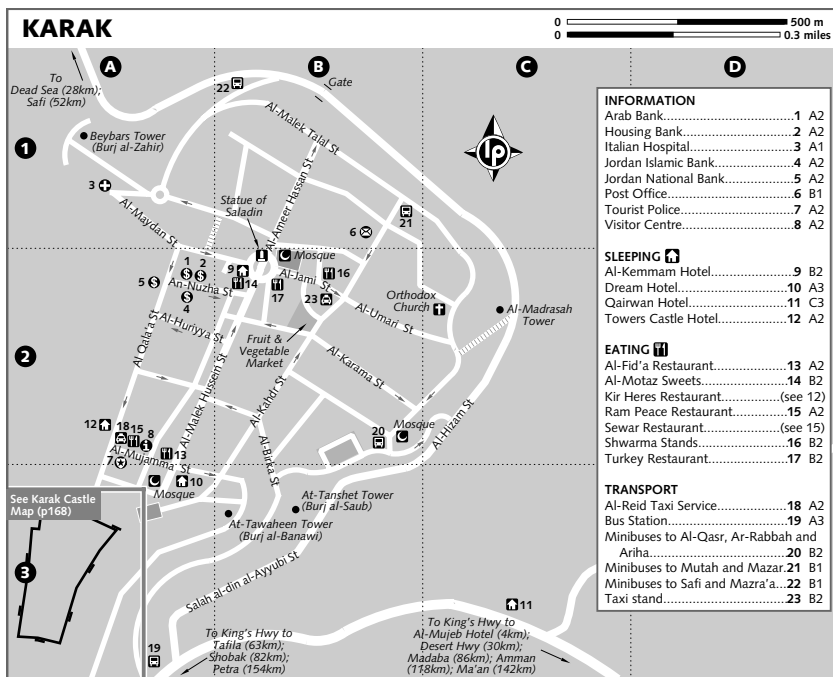
De Chatillon was later executed at the hands of Saladin (the only Crusader leader to suffer such a fate), whose Muslim armies took the castle in 1183 after an epic siege. The Mamluk sultan Beybars took the fort in 1263 and strengthened the fortress, deepening the moat and adding the lower courtyard, but three towers collapsed in an earthquake in AD 1293.

Little more is known of the castle until Jean Louis Burckhardt (the Swiss explorer who rediscovered Petra) passed through Karak in 1812, describing the castle as 'shattered but imposing'.

In the 1880s, religious fighting compelled the Christians of Karak to flee north to resettle Madaba and Ma'in; peace was only restored after thousands of Turkish troops were stationed in the town.

### Orientation

The old city of Karak is easy to get around on foot, although beware the madden-



ing one-way system if you are driving. The modern town centre radiates around the statue of Saladin. The plaza near the entrance to the castle has been recently redeveloped and it's in the surrounding streets that you'll find most of the tourist hotels and restaurants.

Tourist authorities have recently built two panorama points a couple of kilometres southeast and northwest of the castle, which provide useful stopping points if you are driving.

### Information

If you need to change money here, look no further than An-Nuzha St, a small block located south of the Saladin roundabout. There are at least four banks that change money, and most have an ATM for Visa and MasterCard.

**Italian Hospital** (Al-Maydan St)

**Post office** (Al-Khadr St) In the lower (northern) part of town.

**Tourist police** (☎ 191; Al Qala'a St)

**Visitor centre** (☎ 2351150; Al-Mujamma St; ☎ 8am-3.30pm Sat-Thu)

### Karak Castle

The gate to Karak Castle (admission JD1; ☎ 8am-6pm, to 4pm winter) is reached from the southern end of Al Qala'a St.

Throughout the castle are informative display boards with detailed descriptions of the history and function of each structure. It's worth bringing a torch (flashlight) to explore the darker regions, and some doorways are quite low so watch your head. Reconstruction and excavation work within the castle is ongoing.

The main entrance, known as **Ottoman's Gate**, is at the end of a short bridge over the dry moat. The old entrance or **Crusader's Gate** was once reached via a wooden bridge, 50m to the east, but has not yet been opened to the public.

From Ottoman's Gate, head past the ticket office and take the path leading up to the left. Resist the temptation to head into the vaulted corridor straight ahead and instead follow the path that leads hard left (north). The long chamber you enter to the right is known as the **Crusader Gallery** or stables.

Near the far end of the gallery, steps lead down to the Crusader's Gate. Those entering the castle did so via a narrow winding passage (separated from the Crusader Gallery by a wall). This is typical of Crusader castles, ensuring the entrance could be easily defended as it was not possible to enter the castle in large numbers. On the north wall is a (now headless) **carved figure** which local legend claims to be Saladin, but which actually dates from the 2nd century AD and is believed by scholars to be a Nabataean funerary carving. A small staircase leads up to the site of the ruined **northeast tower**; watch your step.

From the carving, a long passageway leads southwest. Along the left side were the **soldiers' barracks** with small holes for light, walls of limestone and straw and a few Byzantine **rock inscriptions** on the walls. Across the corridor is the **kitchen**, which contains large round stones used for grinding olives and huge storage areas for oil and wheat. In a dark tunnel (only visible with a torch) are some **Greek inscriptions** of unknown meaning. A door from the kitchen leads to the right (west) to the huge **oven**.

Continuing southwest along the main passage, you leave the cool, covered area and emerge into the light. Down to the left is the plunging **glacis**, the dizzyingly steep rocky slope that prevented invaders from climbing up to the castle and prisoners from climbing down. This is where Renauld de Chatillon delighted in expelling undesirables.

If you turn hard right (west, then northwest), you'll enter the overgrown **upper court**, which has a large **cistern** and the largely unexcavated remains of what are believed to have been the domestic **residences** of the castle. At the northern end of the castle is the

**terrace**, directly above the Crusader Gallery, which affords fine views over the castle and down to the moat. Above the far (southern) end of the castle rises **Umm al-Thallaja** (Mother of Snows), the hill which posed the greatest threat to the castle's defences during times of siege. To the west is the village of **Al-Shabiya**, which was once called Al-Ifran because many Crusaders (Franks) settled here after the fall of the castle.

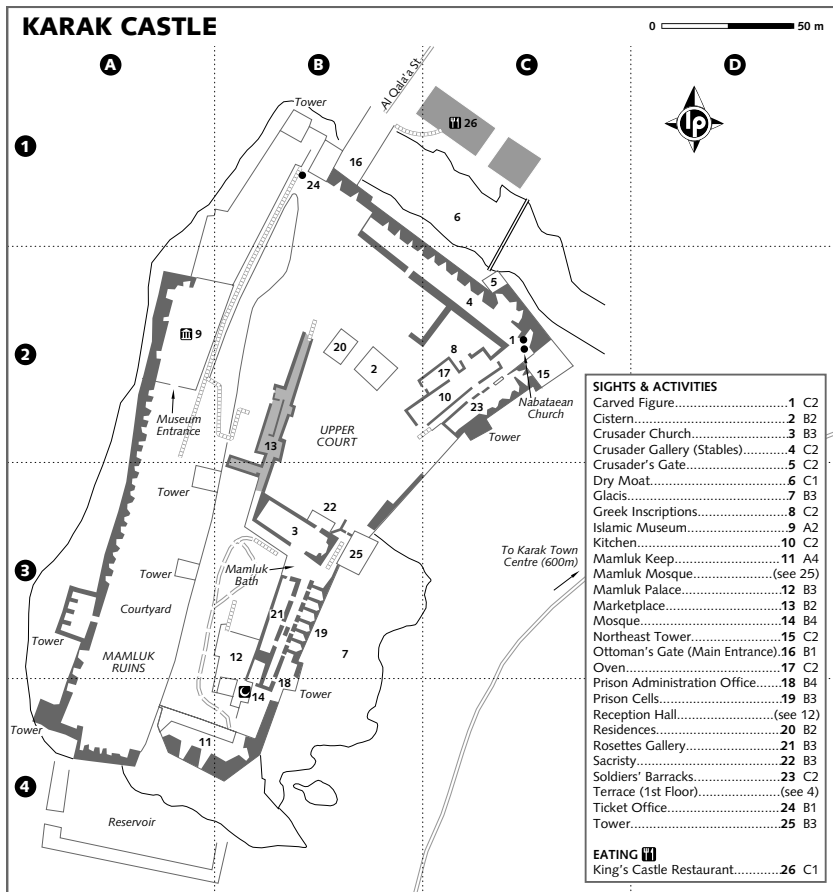
Returning to where you emerged from the long corridor, head southwest. On the left is a **tower** and what is believed to have been a **Mamluk mosque**. On the right is the castle's main **Crusader church** with a **sacristy** down the stairs to the right (north). Note how in this lowered room there are arrow slits in the walls suggesting that this originally formed part of the castle's outer wall.

If you continue to the southern end of the castle, you'll find yourself in front of the impressive, reconstructed **Mamluk keep**. Because it faces Umm al-Thallaja, it was here that the defences were strongest, with 6.5m-thick walls, arrow slits on all four levels and a crenellated section at the top. The keep was built from 1260 by the Mamluk sultan Beybars. It's possible to climb upstairs, past a series of blind niches, to a hidden set of stairs leading up to the upper level.

From the keep, walk northwest, around to the stairs which lead down to the **Mamluk palace**, which was built for Sultan al-Nasir Muhammad in 1311 using earlier Crusader materials. The open-air **reception hall** is a variation of the classic Islamic design of four **iwans** or chambers off the main hall; on two sides are barrel-vaulted rooms. On the one side was the **mosque**, which was probably reserved for palace notables, with the clearly visible mihrab facing Mecca.

### A CHIVALROUS SIEGE

In the winter of AD 1183, a gathering of all the important Frankish (Crusader) nobles took place in Karak. They came to celebrate a carefully choreographed wedding, organised as a means of reconciling quarrelling Frankish factions. Saladin, the leader of the Islamic armies, seized on the opportunity and captured the town but met stiffer resistance at the castle. With the catapult assault under way, legend has it that the wedding celebrations within continued unabated. Lady Stephanie, the heiress of Karak, sent out some of the wedding dishes for Saladin. Saladin in turn asked in which section of the castle the young couple were celebrating their wedding night and ordered that this part of the castle was not to be bombarded – a symbol of the chivalry that characterised many of the battles at the time. Saladin's armies withdrew when Frankish reinforcements were sent from across the hills from Jerusalem.



Before continuing, pause near the top of the stairs for some good **views** down Wadi Karak, towards what is believed to be the site of the condemned cities of Sodom and Gomorrah (see p147). Return to the main Crusader church; immediately south some stairs lead down. Two corridors run off to the southwest. The left (east) corridor leads past seven **prison cells** and at the southern end was the **prison administration office**. The right (west) passage leads from the foot of the stairs through the **Rosettes Gallery**, named after the carved rosette at the foot of the stairs.

If you're game, take the third passage to the left of the steps, which leads northwest through the bowels of the castle, roughly

underneath the church. The corridor turns right (north) and you emerge into the better-lit areas of the delightful underground **marketplace** with various **shops** and **cellars** feeding off it.

At the northern end of the market, the path leads back to the entrance (also the exit) or you can detour to the southwest down the hill to the **Mamluk ruins** and the excellent **Islamic Museum** (☎ 8am-around 3pm). If you're lucky you may be able to persuade the curator to open up the nearby underground tunnel for you to explore.

### Sleeping

**Towers Castle Hotel** (☎ 2352489; fax 2354293; Al-Qala'a St; dm/s/d JD3/8/12, s/d with private bathroom

from JD9/16, new s/d JD12/18) This is the obvious choice, with a good location, a good variety of rooms and friendly Egyptian management. The rooms, many with great views, are large, bright and clean. Prices include breakfast.

**Dream Hotel** (☎ 077 745762; karak\_dream\_hotel@yahoo.com; Al-Mujamma St; s/d with private bathroom JD12/16) The friendly touch of the Towers Castle is lacking here (even though the owners are the same) but it's not bad value, with reasonable rooms. Breakfast costs an extra JD2.500 per person.

**Al-Kemmam Hotel** (☎ 079 5632365; Al-Maydan St; bed in shared r JD3, s/d JD5/6) A local men-only doshouse and the only one in the modern town centre. It's not much fun but guests can use the kitchen and there's hot water in the shared bathrooms. There are only four rooms.

**Qairwan Hotel** (☎ 2396022; fax 2396122; King's Highway; s/d standard JD15/20, deluxe JD20/25; ☎) This comfortable converted home has a relaxed B&B feel. The nine rooms are all unique and colourful with some nice attempts at decoration and all come with satellite TV and fridge. The upper floor is probably quieter. The hotel is 500m from the bus station, outside the main town of Karak.

**Al-Mujeb Hotel** (☎ 2386090, fax 2386091; King's Highway; s/d/tr with private bathroom, tax & breakfast JD22/30/45) Budget tour groups like this place for the best rooms in Karak (with satellite TV, towels and a fridge) and the attentive staff. It is around 5km from Karak, by the junction on the road to Ar-Rabba, and therefore inconvenient without your own vehicle (a taxi costs around JD2.500 one way).

### Eating

Most restaurants are near the castle on Al-Mujamma St or near the statue of Saladin in the modern town. There are some cheap shwarma stands in the streets around the statue of Saladin, particularly east along Al-Jami St.

**Ram Peace Restaurant** (☎ 353789; Al-Mujamma St; mezze JD1, mains JD3; ☎ 8am-10pm), next to Al-Reid Taxi Service office, is friendly but the local food is better than the Western variations. The next-door **Sewar Restaurant** (Al-Mujamma St; mezze JD1, mains JD3) is similar.

**Al-Fid'a Restaurant** (☎ 079 5037622; Al-Mujamma St; mains JD2.500-3.500; ☎ 8am-10pm) Another popular place and excellent value with main courses,

dips and salads for decent prices. The service is good and the atmosphere cosy.

**Kir Heres Restaurant** (☎ 2355595; Al-Qala'a St; starters JD1-2.500, mains JD5-7; ☎ 9am-10pm) In the same building as the Towers Castle Hotel, this is a notch up in quality and a welcome addition to the Karak culinary scene. Though relatively expensive, it has good food and service, and a pleasant ambience. The mezze are best, including good fat-toosh, eggplant salad and *matafayah* (egg-plant dip). Ask about the ostrich steak.

**Turkey Restaurant** (☎ 079 5730431; Al-Jami St; mains JD1.500; ☎ 7am-9.30pm) One of several local restaurants offering roast chicken, hummus and other standard local fare.

**Al-Motaz Sweets** (☎ 2353388; An-Nuzha St; ☎ 8am-10pm) One of the better places in town for those with a sweet tooth, serving a range of pastries and sweets.

**King's Castle Restaurant** (☎ 2396070; lunch buffet JD6; ☎ noon-4pm) The daily buffet here is popular with day-tripping tour groups and it's a pretty good deal, with pleasant outdoor seating and over 20 salads to choose from. The eastern building is worth a visit for its impressive relief display of the castle as it stood in its original form.

### Getting There & Away

As with anywhere along the King's Highway, Karak can be difficult but not impossible to reach by public transport. The main bus station is outside the town, at the bottom of the hill, by the junction of the King's Highway.

### MINIBUS

From the main bus station, minibuses go to Amman's Wahadat station (around 800 fils, two hours) via the Desert Highway on a semiregular basis. Minibuses also run every hour or so along the King's Highway from Karak to Tafila (700 fils, around 1 hour), the best place for connections to Qadsiyya (for Dana Nature Reserve) and Shobak. To Wadi Musa (for Petra), take a minibus to Ma'an (JD1.500, two hours) and change there. Alternatively, leapfrog on minibuses to Tafila, Shobak and then Wadi Musa.

Buses to Aqaba (JD2, three hours) travel in the mornings via the Dead Sea Highway about four times a day. In the afternoon you're better off taking the Amman bus to Qatrana on the Desert Highway and changing for a bus headed south to Aqaba.

There are smaller minibus stands around town (indicated on map) for services to Safi (550 fils) and Mazra'a (350 fils) on the Dead Sea Highway, south along the King's Highway to Mu'tah (150 fils) and Mazar (150 fils), and north to Al-Qasr, Ar-Rabba and Ariha.

### TAXI

From Amman it's possible (with considerable bargaining) to charter a taxi to Karak via the Desert Highway for about JD18 one way. From Amman via the King's Highway, with a few stops in Wadi Mujib and Madaba, expect to pay at least JD22.

From Karak, taxi fares cost around JD30 to Amman, JD35 to Petra and JD20 to Madaba. Try **Al-Reid Taxi Service** (☎ 2352297; Al-Mujamma St) or just head down to the taxi stand on Umari St.

### Getting Around

The old city of Karak has a tricky system of narrow one-way streets. If you're driving, study the map carefully to avoid some serious frustration.

### AR-RABBA

عرايه

The holy and historical city of Ar-Rabba came under the rule of King Meshu (9th century BC), then Alexander the Great (mid-4th century BC) and later the Nabataeans (from the 2nd century BC to the 2nd century AD). The Greeks named it Arceopolis after Ares, the god of war, and the Romans based their Arabian governor here. It was known locally as Rabbath Moba.

At the northern end of the small town are the small **ruins** of a Roman temple from the end of the 3rd century AD, with two niches that contained statues of the Roman emperors Diocletian and Maximian, and other Roman and Byzantine buildings. None of the ruins are signposted.

The ruins are permanently open, free to enter and located to the east of the main road. Ar-Rabba is easily accessible by minibus from Karak, 16km to the south, but is best visited on a 15-minute stop en route between Madaba and Karak.

### MU'TAH

موته

☎ 03

Mu'tah is a nondescript town that boasts one of the best **universities** (www.mutah.edu.jo) in Jordan, home to 12,000 students. Mu'tah

is also famous as the location of a battle in AD 632 (some historians say 629), when Christianity first clashed with the armies of Islam (the Byzantine forces defeated the Arab Muslims but they turned the tables four years later). At the main junction in the south of Mu'tah, you'll find a **monument** that commemorates the battle and its *shaheed* (martyrs).

At Mazar (meaning 'tomb'), 3km south of Mu'tah, there is also an impressive **mosque** complex containing the **tombs** of some of the Prophet Mohammed's companions killed in battle.

Minibuses regularly run between Karak and Mu'tah. From Madaba, try the daily university minibus (JD1,500, two hours) from the main bus station, which travels via the Desert Highway. Be aware, however, that it often doesn't operate during the university holidays so check the day before you want to travel.

### KHIRBET TANNOUR

خربة التنور

As the King's Highway climbs out of the impressive Wadi Hasa valley (the biblical Zered Valley), at a turn in the road, a dirt track leads off 1.5km to the west to a small hill. A steep 15-minute hike to the top of the hill reveals the ruined 2000-year-old Nabataean temple of **Khirbet Tannour** (admission free; ☎ daylight hr), in an epic location across from a brooding piece of black volcanic hillside.

In all truth there's not much left here to see except for some column bases and the outlines of a temple courtyard and three side rooms (possibly banqueting halls set around a central pool), but most people find the wild location worth a visit for the hike and setting alone.

Copies of the site's famous statue of Nike reside in Amman's National Archaeological Museum and the University of Jordan's Museum of Archaeology; the original is in Cincinnati. A statue of the goddess Atargatis unearthed here is currently in Amman's National Archaeological Museum.

There's no public transport here so you'll have to have a car or hitch. The turn-off is 36km south of Karak town, at the crest of the hill; the 1.5km access road is OK for cars. Park by the communication tower and watch out for the local herders' dogs.

The turnoff signpost is marked as 'AT TA NOURAN I QUI ES SI', which isn't a Latin

inscription, but a weather-beaten version of 'At-Tannour Antiquities Site'!

### HAMMAT BURBITA & HAMMAT AFRA

حمامات بربيتا & حمامات افرا

Hammamat Burbita (or Burbayta) and Hammamat Afra are two thermal hot springs near Wadi Hasa, but the springs and baths at Hammamat Ma'in, near Madaba, are better (although they're more expensive). Women are likely to feel uncomfortable at these two hot springs if local men are around in any numbers. Wadi Afra is currently being upgraded so expect facilities to improve and prices to rise.

The two springs are signposted about 23km north of Tafila; from the turn-off it's about 13km to Burbita, a green patch at the base of a wadi with a small uninviting rock pool and makeshift galvanised iron roof. Another 6km further on, the road ends at the nicer Hammamat Afra. Both spots are popular on Fridays.

There is no public transport to either spot. If you're driving, signposting is confusing and you'll need to ask directions along the way. A chartered taxi from Tafila to Afra costs around JD12 return, including waiting time.

### TAFILA

الطفيله

☎ 03

Tafila (also spelled Tafileh) is a busy market centre and transport junction. There is nothing to see, except the very decrepit exterior ruins of a **Crusader castle** (the interior is closed to visitors). It was in Tafila that one of the Prophet Mohammed's emissaries was beheaded, leading to the military conquest by the Islamic armies from AD 632.

**Afra Hotel** (s/d with shared bath JD5/7) is the only place to stay and is very drab.

Plenty of cheap places sell felafel and shwarma around town. **Adom Rest House** (meals JD4), at the southern end of Tafila on the highway to Dana, is about the best place to eat.

Minibuses from Karak (700 fils, one hour) to Tafila cross the superb scenery of Wadi Hasa. There are also direct minibuses to/from Wahadat station in Amman (JD1, 2½ hours) via the Desert Highway; Aqaba (JD1,200, 2½ hours) via the Dead Sea Highway; Ma'an (JD1, one hour) via the Desert Highway; and just down the King's

Highway to Shobak (800 fils, one hour) and Qadsiyya (for Dana Nature Reserve; 350 fils, 30 minutes).

### DANA NATURE RESERVE

محمية دانا الطبيعية

☎ 03

The **Dana Nature Reserve** (adult/student JD6/3) is one of Jordan's hidden gems, as well as its most impressive ecotourism project. Down off the King's Highway, and the main gateway to the reserve, is the charming 15th-century stone village of **Dana**, which clings to a precipice overlooking the valley and commands exceptional views. It's a great place to chill out and spend a few days hiking, reading and relaxing. Most of the reserve is only accessible on foot.

The reserve is the largest in Jordan and includes a variety of terrain, from sandstone cliffs and peaks over 1500m high to a low point of 50m below sea level in the Rift Valley of Wadi Araba, about 14km to the west. The red rock escarpments and valley protect a surprisingly diverse ecosystem, including about 600 species of plants (from citrus trees and desert shrubs to tropical acacias), about 180 species of birds, and over 45 species of mammals (of which 25 are endangered), including ibex, mountain gazelle, sand cat, red fox and wolf. The lower western areas of the reserve can be very hot in July.

There are almost 100 archaeological sites in the reserve, most still being excavated by British teams. Of most interest are the ruins of **Khirbet Feinan**, at the mouth of Wadi Feinan and Wadi Ghuweir. The copper mines here date back 6000 years, when they were the largest metal smelting operations in the Near East (they are mentioned in the Bible). The Romans later worked the mines using Christian slaves. You can explore the ruins of three churches, a Roman tower and the remains of slag heaps where the copper was mined. The main mines of Umm al-Amad are a 13km return hike up in the surrounding hills and you'll need a guide from Feinan Lodge (p173) to reach them. The hills still contain copper, but despite intense lobbying from mining companies, the Jordanian government has agreed not to allow mining in the reserve.

Dana village itself dates from the Ottoman period but was largely abandoned less than a generation ago as locals moved to

nearby Qadsiyya in search of jobs. About 50 Bedouin families live inside the reserve.

The reserve was taken over by the RSCN in 1993 and was the first of its kind in Jordan – an attempt to promote ecotourism, protect wildlife and improve the lives of local villagers in an integrated project. The reserve directly or indirectly employs over 40 locals, and income from tourism has helped to rebuild Dana village and provide environmental education in local schools. Villagers also make excellent local crafts (organic herbs, fruit rolls, jams, olive-oil soaps, candles and silver jewellery) that are sold by the RSCN throughout Jordan. The leather goods and candles produced by local Bedouin women at Feinan Lodge, in particular, give local women economic power and an incentive to move away from environmentally damaging goat herding.

### Information

The **Visitor centre** (☎ 2270497; dhana@rscn.org.jo; ☎ 8am–8pm) in the guesthouse complex in Dana village includes an RSCN shop, nature exhibits, craft workshops (closed by 3.30pm) and a food-drying centre for making organic food. This is also the place to obtain further information about the reserve and its hiking trails, and arrange a guide. The staff at the centre are knowledgeable, enthusiastic and friendly, and you sense a genuine commitment to the cause. The views from the balcony are stupendous.

### Activities

To get the most out of the park you need to explore on foot. The visitor centre can give information on the following **hikes**. Most require a guide, which costs from JD15 for up to two hours to JD32 for a full day, per group. The trails from Al-Barra require a short drive to get to the trailhead (RSCN charges JD6 for a shuttle). The major trails include the following (those marked with an asterisk are only available 1 Mar–31 Oct):

**\*Cave Trail** (1km, one hour, can be self-guided) From Rummana Campground to nearby caves and Byzantine ruins.

**Nabataean Tomb Tour** (2.5km, two hours, guides required, JD10) From Al-Barra to Shaq al-Reesh; short but strenuous.

**Palm Trees Wadi Tour** (16km, six to eight hours, guides required, JD30 per group) From Al-Barra down through the oases, palm groves and pools of Wadi Ghuweir to Feinan Lodge. A spectacular but difficult hike.

**\*Rummana Campground Trail** (one or two hours, can be self-guided) A circular route around the campground, good for bird-watchers (there's a bird hide) and for spotting griffon vultures.

**\*Rummana Mountain Trail** (one to two hours, can be self-guided) From Rummana Campground to the nearby Rummana (Pomegranate) Peak, for great views over Wadi Araba.

**\*Steppe Trail** (8km, three hours, guides required, JD10 per group) From Dana village to Rummana Campground. Takes you past dramatic wadi escarpments and through terraced gardens.

**Wadi Dana to Feinan** (14km, four to five hours, can be self-guided) The most popular trail, it takes you down through the quietly impressive scenery of Wadi Dana. The trail is easy to follow. The downside is that it's a killer uphill hike on the way back. After an hour you get to a dry waterfall from where you can explore a mini-*siq* (gorge or canyon); an hour later the trail crosses the wadi floor and this is a good place to turn back. The last third takes you through litter-filled Bedouin camps. It would be a very long day to hike to Feinan Lodge and back. Either stay the night or arrange with the RSCN office for a car to take you back to Dana via Greigra and the Dead Sea Highway (JD36).

**Waterfalls Area** (2.5km, 2½ hours, guides required, JD10 per group) From Al-Barra to the springs and ruins of Nawatef and back. A great short walk.

It's also possible to do an ambitious two-day trip to Feinan Lodge, hiking in via Wadi Ghuweir, overnighting at the lodge and returning via Wadi Dana. Hotels in Dana can help organise longer treks to Shobak (two days) via Wadi Feinan, Wadi Ghuweir and the village of Mansourah, and on to Petra (four days).

**Mountain-bike trails** are planned for around Feinan Lodge.

### Sleeping & Eating

The RSCN operates three excellent places to stay, for which bookings should be made in advance through the Wild Jordan centre in Amman (see p70). Camping in the reserve is not allowed.

**Dana Hotel** (Sons of Dana Cooperative; ☎ 2270537; sdqe@nets.com.jo; s/d JD5/10, with private bathroom JD8/12) This ethically run place is the best budget option in town, with simple but stylish rooms and helpful management. The hotel is part of a village cooperative that provides medical and social programs to around 150 local residents. Meals cost JD4 per person and are served in the rooftop Bedouin tent. Room prices include breakfast.

**Dana Tower Hotel** (☎ 2270226, 079 5688853; dana\_tower2@hotmail.com; dm/s/d JD1.500/3/6, s/d with private bathroom JD4/8, full board per person JD8) This rather unsightly privately owned place occupies a prime location overlooking the gorge, but sadly hasn't made any use of the splendid views. That said, it's a welcoming place and a funky, grungy option that's popular with younger backpackers. There's free tea, a washing machine, shared hot showers, rooftop seating and friendly management. It's just downhill from the Dana Hotel.

**Dana Guest House** (☎ 2270497; dhana@rscn.org.jo; s JD34, d/tr with balcony JD43/53, q with bunk beds JD57, s/d with bathroom JD53/57) The RSCN runs this sleek and highly recommended lodge. The nine rooms are comfortable and stylish, decorated with traditional kilims and ibex-motif bedspreads, and those with a balcony have breathtaking views. Only one room has a private bathroom, but the shared facilities have 24-hour hot water. It's a great place for a splurge. Room prices include breakfast. Other meals (JD7) are available but book them in advance.

**Rummana Campground** (s/d/tr tent incl breakfast & park entry fee JD18/33/49; ☎ 1 Mar–31 Oct) This lovely RSCN campsite is a bit pricey but located in a superbly peaceful spot, surrounded by several fine hiking trails. Tents come with mattresses and kerosene lamps and there's a cold-water shower block. You can drive here (see right) or hike in three hours from Dana village (opposite). As with all nature reserves, book through RSCN/Wild Jordan in Amman, though it's also possible to book through the visitor centre. Book meals in advance (JD3 to JD8) or use the barbecue grills (bring your own food and fuel). There is a 20% discount for students.

**Feinan Lodge** (s/d/tr/q incl breakfast JD35/44/54/60; Wadi Feinan; ☎ 1 Sep–30 Jun) This remarkable one-of-a-kind ecolodge opened in late 2005 and is only accessible on foot from Dana or by 4WD from the Dead Sea Highway via the Bedouin village of Greigra. The 26 lovely rooms are all unique and most have a balcony. At night the lodge is lit solely by locally made candles (they get through more than 4000 a month!), adding to a unique atmosphere that sits somewhere between medieval monastery and desert fortress (think *Name of the Rose* meets Moroccan kasbah!). It gets very hot here in summer (there is air-conditioning) and you should

bring a torch and mosquito repellent. The hot water is solar-heated so is a bit unreliable. Book through the RSCN.

### Getting There & Away

The easiest way to get to Dana by public transport is from Tafila. Minibuses run every hour or so between Tafila and Qadsiyya (350 fils, 30 minutes). The turn-off to Dana village (the faded sign simply says 'Dana Hotel') is 1km north of Qadsiyya; from here it's a 2.8km (steep downhill) walk to Dana village. Headed out of Dana ask around the hotels for a ride as you don't want to walk back up that hill, believe me... A daily bus to Amman (JD1.500, three hours) leaves Qadsiyya at 6.30am.

If you're chartering a taxi in Karak, expect to pay around JD15 one way. From Ma'an to the south, an irregular minibus (750 fils, 1½ hours) should go to Qadsiyya en route to Tafila, but check before boarding.

The Dana Tower Hotel claims that it will pick up travellers for free from Qadsiyya or even Petra if you ring in advance and stay at their hotel. They can arrange a taxi to Petra for between JD10 and JD15.

If you're driving from Tafila or Karak, the first signpost you'll see off to the right (west) only goes to the Rummana Campground; it's better to continue on to the turn-off just before Qadsiyya.

To get to Rummana Campground from Dana village, head 4.5km north of Qadsiyya along the King's Highway and take the signposted left turn for 6km. RSCN can arrange transport from Dana village for around JD6. You must park your vehicle at the Tower entrance and take a free shuttle or walk 2km downhill.

### SHOBAK CASTLE

شوبك

☎ 03

Shobak, formerly called Mons Realis (Mont Real, or Montreal – the Royal Mountain), was built by the Crusader king Baldwin I in AD 1115. It withstood numerous attacks from the armies of Saladin before succumbing in 1189, a year after Karak, after an 18-month siege. It was later occupied in the 14th century by the Mamluks, who built over many of the Crusader buildings.

**Shobak Castle** (admission free; ☎ daylight hr) has a wild, remote feel to it and perhaps for this reason some readers prefer it to the more

touristed (but more impressive) Karak Castle. It's worth a visit despite tricky transport.

Built on a small knoll right at the edge of a plateau, the castle is especially imposing when seen from a distance. Restoration work is ongoing and hopefully this will include some signs explaining the castle's various elements. In the meantime, the caretaker shows visitors around for about JD5. It's a good idea to bring a torch (flashlight) for exploring the castle's many dark corners.

As you climb up from the entrance, there are some **wells** on the left. Soon after passing these, you'll see the reconstructed **church**, one of two in the castle, down to the left. It has an elegant apse supported by two smaller alcoves. The room leading off to the west was the **baptistry**; on the north wall there are traces of water channels leading from above.

Returning back to the main path, turn left (west). After you pass under the arches, a door leads you right (north) into the extensive **market**. If you take the path to the left of the door, some 375 steps lead down into an amazing **secret passageway** that bores into the black bowels of the castle to a subterranean spring, finally surfacing via a ladder outside the castle, beside the road to Shobak town. Tread carefully, use a torch and don't even think about coming down here if you are claustrophobic. If instead you continue past the tunnel, heading west, after about 50m you pass a large two-storey building with archways, built by the Crusaders but adapted by the Mamluks as a **school**.

At the northern end of the castle is the semicircular **keep** with four arrow slits for defending the castle. Outside and to the east, dark steps lead down to the **prison**. If heading to the northeast corner of the castle, you can see **Quranic inscriptions**, possibly dating from the time of Saladin, carved in Kufic script around the outside of the keep. Heading south along the eastern perimeter, you'll soon pass the entrance to the **court of Baldwin I**, which has been partly recon-

structed; see if you can tell which of the stones are originals. The court was later used as a **Mamluk school**.

Continuing south, you'll pass some **baths** on the right (west). Off to the left (east) is a reconstructed **Mamluk watchtower**. Just past the tower is the second **church**. On a room to the left (north) as you enter, you can see above a door in the east wall a weathered carving of a **Crusader cross**. In the church proper, the arches have been reconstructed and from here you can see more **Kufic inscriptions** on the wall of the watchtower.

Beneath the church are the **catacombs**, which contain some Islamic tablets, some Christian carvings, large spherical rocks used in catapults and what is said to be Saladin's very simple throne. From the catacombs, the path leads back down to the gate.

### Sleeping & Eating

There is nowhere to stay in Shobak (properly known as Musallath) village but the **Shobak Castle Campground** (☎ 2164265; per person JD5) is sign-posted both from the village and the castle (2.5km). It's set in a tranquil spot with nice views, although it can get cold at night.

There are a few grocery stores and cheap restaurants in Shobak village.

### Getting There & Away

Occasional minibuses link Shobak village with Amman's Wahadat station (JD1.500, 2½ hours), Aqaba and Karak. Also some minibuses travelling between Wadi Musa and Ma'an pass through Shobak. There are less reliable minibuses between Shobak and Tafila (800 fils, one hour).

If driving, there are two well-signposted roads from the King's Highway to the castle and there are signs from Shobak village. Otherwise, from Shobak village to the castle, you'll have to charter a taxi (up to JD3 to JD4 return including waiting time; around 3km each way).

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