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A Honeymoon On Horseback

Champagne for the brain

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Olivia Glazebrook and her husband brave the Jordanian wilderness

Being the sort of person who can throw a few things in a bag, take off at a moment's notice and hunker down anywhere, I had left planning our honeymoon pretty much up to my husband. However, just to be helpful, just to make sure there wouldn't be tears or tantrums on the first day of our marriage (at least, not from me), I did provide him with one or two pointers: 'No long-haul flights, boat trips or bus rides; no spas, clinics or retreats; not too hot, wet, windy or air-conditioned, and absolutely no surprises. But really, my dearest one, it's up to you; I'll just fall in with whatever you decide.'

So on day two of married life I was delighted to find myself standing beside a Bedouin tent pitched on soft, pink desert sand. I gazed at the darkening silhouettes of colossal sandstone mountains, and I heard nothing but the wind, sighing across the sand and rattling in the bone-dry bushes. Then came the welcome clatter of dinner being prepared, and the sound of a horse knocking over a bucket. Bliss.

We were in Jordan, in the 300 square miles of protected wilderness which is called Wadi Rum (meaning Rum Valley), in the south of the country. We were riding horses by day and camping by night — but this was five-star, with a fixed camp, a comfortable bed and even a shower tent. Each morning we ate breakfast (halloumi, sesame, thyme and pitta for me, corn flakes for my husband), set out from camp, picnicked after a three- or four-hour ride, and then took a different route home again, arriving at camp before sunset in time for pints of mint tea and a large and delicious dinner.

Our guide was Hanna Jahshan, who has been taking travellers into Wadi Rum for 15 years. Hanna was great company (crucial, considering we spent all day, every day with him): well-informed, amusing and companionable. Equally importantly, his horses were in excellent nick, as fit as fleas, and stepped out fresh and keen every morning, not at all dulled by their years of experience. Hanna's horse was a dappled stallion, and ours were elderly mares — leading to occasional bouts of Graduate-style flirting — but they knew their business and, given a free rein, all three went off like rockets.

Wadi Rum consists of wide, sandy-floored valleys spread between sandstone mountains which rise hundreds of metres out of the ground. It is as if a giant rock pool has been drained of seawater, and nothing but the sandy bottom and 'islands' of rock remain. These huge rocks are completely bare of vegetation and shaped like mounds of wax left behind by burned-down candles, or blobs of honeycomb spilled from a teaspoon on to a table: soft-edged and curvaceous. They are red, pink, crimson or white, and sometimes all these colours, brindled from top to bottom.

The views are spectacular. We rode across wide, bleached plateaux and through claret-coloured canyons, we slid down drifts of sand and scrambled up them, we saw white clouds of dust spiralling hundreds of feet into the air, we passed fig trees with livid green leaves springing from rock walls, herds of camels gloomily nibbling on carpets of tiny flowers, a Bedouin carrying a sword and searching the empty landscape for his lost goats, and even an old lady who rode a donkey and warbled into a flute. (But this was too much. She must have been positioned there by the tourist board.)

It was early April, and although deliciously hot during the day, it was cold at night. When we arrived back at camp before dinner we collapsed on to cushions, drank tea, and watched the evening sun turn the rocks a rich, warm orange. I would try to force myself to get up and have a shower before it got dark and cold, but it was such heaven just to lie there, bolstered by cushions and warmed by tea, and watch the last sunlight slide off the tops of the rocks, and an indigo dusk suffuse our surroundings. After showering (inevitably) in the half-dark, and hopping about on the sand with a towel, I dressed for dinner in the alluring combination of leggings, pyjama trousers, sheepskin slippers, several T-shirts, a couple of sweaters and a hat to cover my increasingly filthy hair. Fortunately we ate in almost pitch darkness, so no one could be startled — or dismayed — by such curious attire.

A capricious wind followed us about, blowing one way and then the other. Sometimes it dropped altogether, and then you could hear it begin again, rushing towards us with its melancholy sigh. One night it blew into our tent and rearranged all the furniture in the bedroom. I awoke pinned to the bed by a canvas cupboard, and wrestled with it in silence for a moment before clearing my throat and addressing my husband in my most helpless, wifely tones:

'My love? The cupboard seems to have fallen on top of me.'

'Oh dear, poor darling,' came the solicitous reply, followed by a short silence, and then, 'Snoooore...'

Weakened by giggles, I wrestled with the cupboard for a moment more before falling back to sleep. When I woke in the morning the cupboard and I were still locked in a familiar embrace.

On our final evening, before it got dark, I went for a walk up the narrow gorge behind our camp. Just a hundred yards from the tent, the silence was total. Pink sand was banked between the canyon walls which came so close together I could touch both. I climbed up heaps of tumbled rocks until I could see both the way I had come into the gorge, and the view out. Ahead of me, mountain after mountain reached to the horizon. A pair of doves clattered into the air from a ledge above my head, flapping noisily upward as if trapped in the rafters of a barn. I shimmed a little way up one of the canyon walls until I could perch on a ledge, and settled down on my haunches to hear the silence beating in my ears. After half an hour, as refreshed as if I'd swum in cold water, I returned to camp.

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