

RIDING HIGH

Simone Topolski and her mother discover unspoilt beauty, blazing sunshine and freedom while riding in Jordan



In many ways, my childhood was idyllic. I was one of three children, living in a farmhouse with loving, hard-working parents. My sister Michelle, who was seven years older than me, was the axis on which my whole life pivoted and I idolised her. She and my mother shared an intimate bond and a love of horses. I rode, too, mainly so I could be in the

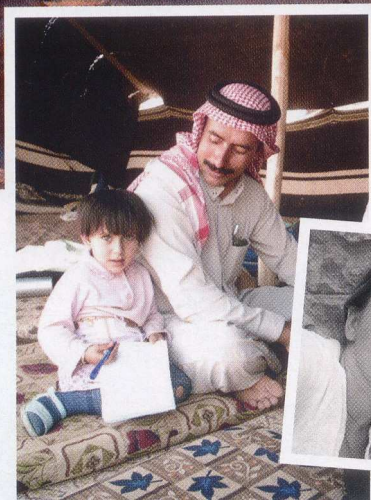
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club, often feeling afraid and a little useless beside them.

In September 1987 when I was eight, everything changed. My sister died suddenly from meningitis and one of the first things my mother did was to stop riding completely – horses held too many memories. It was a hard time for everyone, but what I remember most is wishing I could replace my sister so that my parents would smile again. ▶



Rocky road: the bleak and beautiful Wadi Rum. Insets: a local man and his child, Simone and her mother



◁ Life, as it inexorably does, moved on. I remained close to my mother, and one day last spring, she suggested that we join a small group riding holiday in Jordan in remembrance of Michelle. It was, she said, 20 years since she'd died, and the trip involved riding Arab horses (my sister's favourite) in the Wadi Rum, the ancient desert made famous by TE Lawrence.

Desert rider

A few weeks later, after sightseeing in glorious Petra, we are introduced to our horses by our French and Bedouin guides. Mine is a pony named Mimoum, my mother's, a fiery gelding. I have mixed feelings. I've travelled the world on my own, but being here with my mum, I feel like a child again, and that sense of inadequacy returns.

We pass slowly through the beautiful landscape. Huge, soaring mountains punctuate the shifting peach-coloured sands, offering

shelter and shade as we stop for lunch and respite from the blazing sun. At night, our guides serve us super-sweet mint tea, deliciously rich stews and stacks of warm flat bread around the campfire. We all swap stories and dance to drum beats into the early hours.

With each day that passes my anxiety recedes – caring for the horses in the cool of dawn, the feeling of exhilaration as we race across the sand, hair flying. Each night, as I take off Mimoum's saddle and bridle, I whisper a quiet thank you in her ear and resolve to redefine myself in the here and now.

My mother, too, undergoes her own transformation. The past year

has been hard for her. She has finally sold the house, full with memories, that she had lived in since before my sister's death. Now, riding her horse and rediscovering her love for the freedom of it, the worry lines are easing from her forehead and she seems carefree and content.

One night we find a quiet corner under a lone tree and build a fire. Here we read out letters to Michelle, expressing our loss and love, then send them up in smoke into the starlit night, sharing tears and laughter as we bring her to life in our memories. Looking at my mother, eyes shining, I finally see her as her own person, beyond her role as my mother.

On our last day, we ride out of the desert. We say tearful goodbyes to our guides. Holding hands with my mother as we drive out of the Wadi, we leave the last vestiges of our grief in the desert, replaced by the kind of quiet intimacy I have always wanted. ■

Ride World Wide run this nine-day group trip, which includes six days riding in Wadi Rum plus sightseeing at Petra and the Dead Sea, throughout the year from £1,200 per person, excluding flights (01837 82544, www.rideworldwide.com)