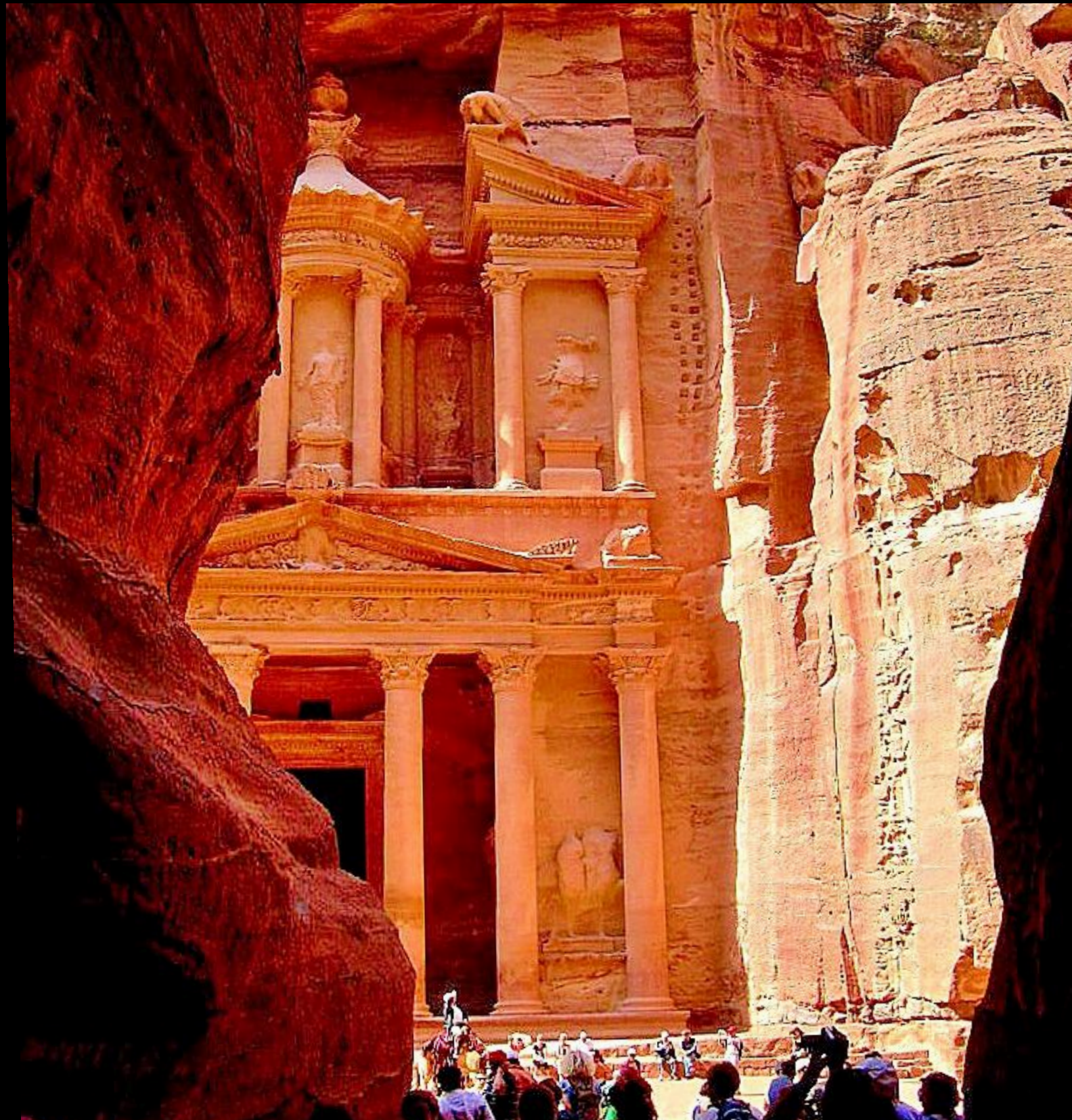


CYCLING JORDAN

Along the King's Highway, to Petra and Beyond



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Thank You

I am deeply grateful for the extraordinary generosity of strangers and the many unexpected acts of kindness we experienced during our cycle tour through Jordan. It was a humbling journey, made richer by the warmth and goodwill of the people we met along the way.

I would also like to thank Ernest Markwood for generously allowing me to use his photographs.

My sister, Amanda, played an invaluable role in preserving the story of my travels by carefully organising my journal entries and photographs. Without her, much of this journey might never have been recorded.

I am especially indebted to my dear friend Val Abrahamse, who looked after my personal and financial affairs back home while I travelled the world. Her care, diligence, and conscientious support made it possible for me to follow my dream.



JORDAN

Along the King's Highway, to Pedra and Beyond

Prelude

Jordan arrived in our journey like a rumour: a place of rose-red cliffs, ancient trade routes, and more altitude than any sensible cyclist would willingly seek out. We had no idea what awaited us—only that the ferry was late, the currency was unfriendly, and the mountains were already sharpening their teeth. Still, we pedalled in with optimism, falafel, and the vague hope that the King's Highway might be flatter than its name suggested. It wasn't, of course. But Jordan had a way of rewarding stubborn travellers: with souqs full of life, tombs that doubled as emergency shelters, and landscapes so dramatic they made even our wheezing bicycles feel heroic.



A Ferry, a Delay, and a Currency That Hates You

From Nuweiba, Egypt, one could theoretically cycle via Israel and Lebanon to Turkey—if one enjoyed bureaucracy, suspicion, and the possibility of being turned away at borders like an unwanted door-to-door salesman. The ferry to Jordan was therefore the obvious choice. It was scheduled for three p.m., which the ferry staff interpreted as “sometime after tea,” and we eventually left at five.

We arrived in Aqaba after dark, which is not the ideal time to cycle into a new country unless you enjoy guessing which shadowy shapes are potholes and which are goats. The next morning, Aqaba revealed itself as a place where Jordanians swim fully clothed, prices are high enough to induce mild vertigo, and the landscape is so mountainous you begin to suspect the entire country is tilted.

Aqaba’s old town was a delightfully chaotic souq full of shisha smoke, men in kaffiyehs, and food so good it made you forget the dinar exchange rate. I bought one JD’s worth of falafel and received two bulging bags—enough to feed a small expedition.



The King's Highway and Other Bad Ideas

We set off along the King's Highway, an ancient trade route connecting Africa to Mesopotamia. It sounds romantic until you're actually on it, pedalling uphill while imagining the Nabateans laughing at your modern suffering. I briefly wondered whether I should have bartered for a camel instead of cycling gear.

The hills were relentless. By late afternoon we reached Ras an-Naqb, pitched our tents at 1,600 metres, and confirmed that yes, Jordan is indeed one long uphill.

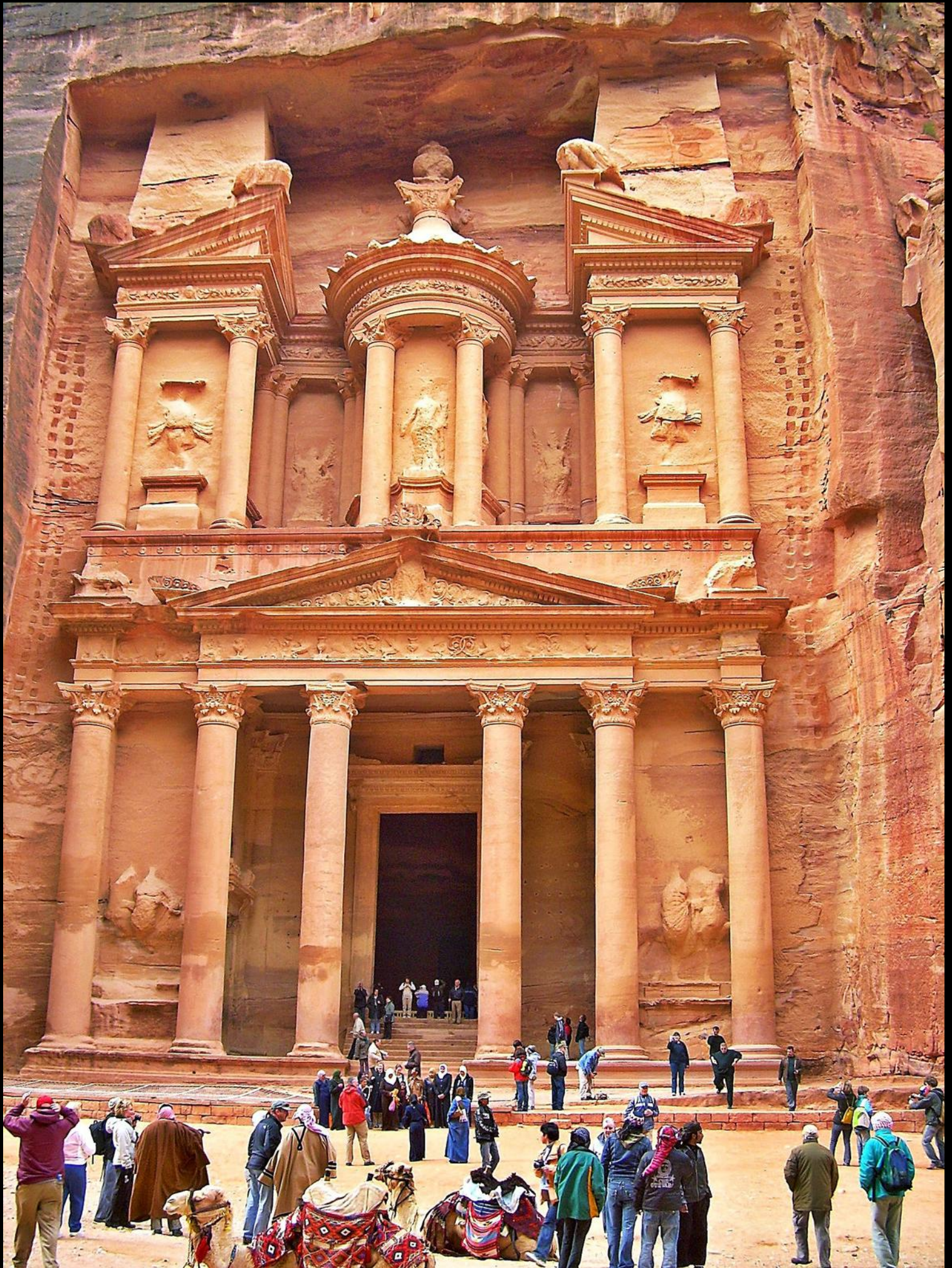
The Valentine Hotel and a Tomb with a View

A mercifully easy 44 km brought us to Wadi Musa, where the Valentine Hotel—pink walls, red curtains, and a mirror above the bed—beckoned like a kitsch oasis. We stayed several days to explore Petra, which, even on a second visit, remains astonishing enough to make you forget your aching legs.

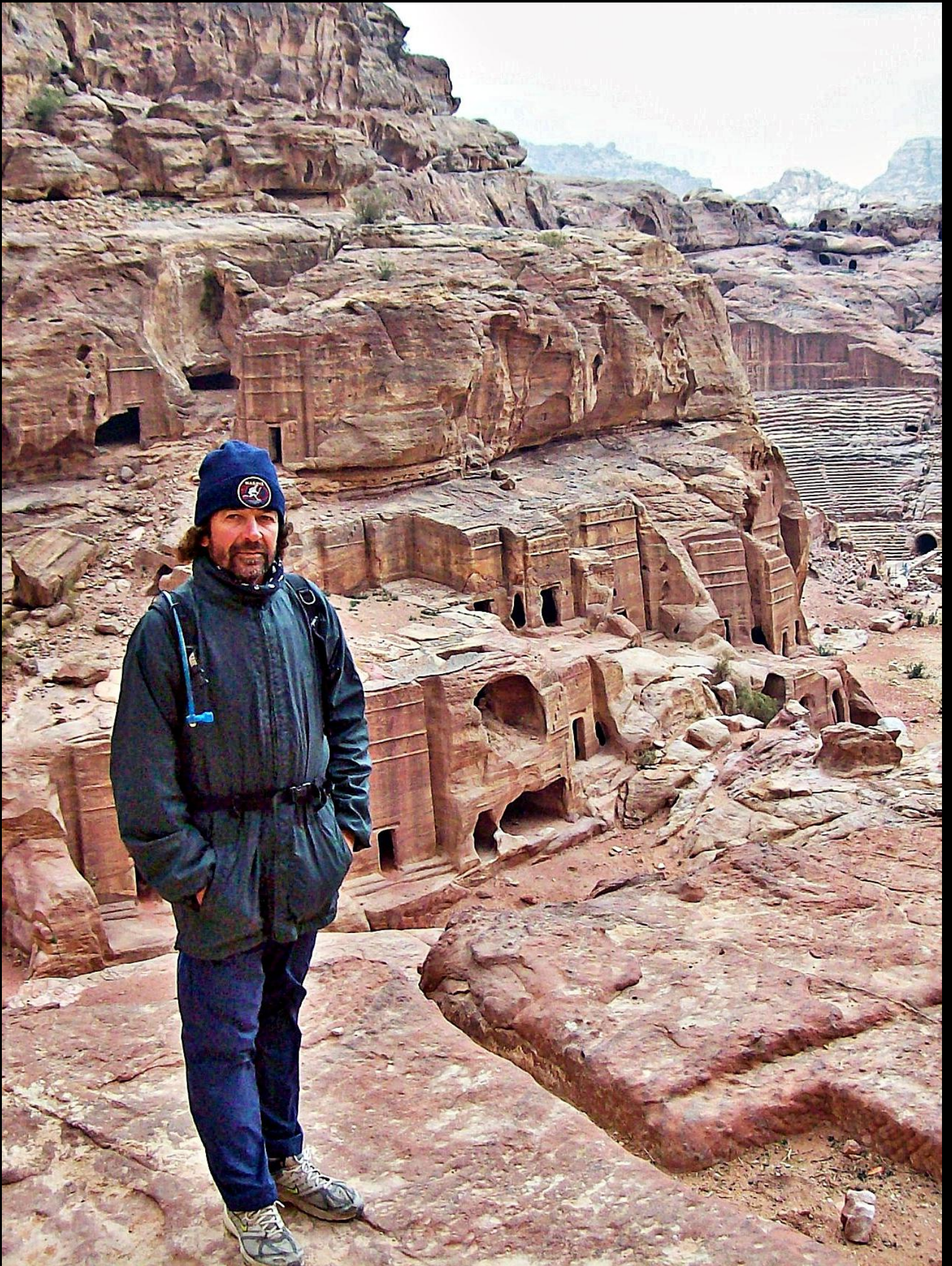
The entrance through the narrow canyon is pure theatre: you shuffle along, wondering what the fuss is about, and then suddenly—bam!—the Treasury appears, 45 metres of ornate sandstone splendour. Petra was once a bustling crossroads of incense, silk, spices, and probably a great deal of shouting. Their water system was ingenious enough to make modern plumbing look like amateur hour.

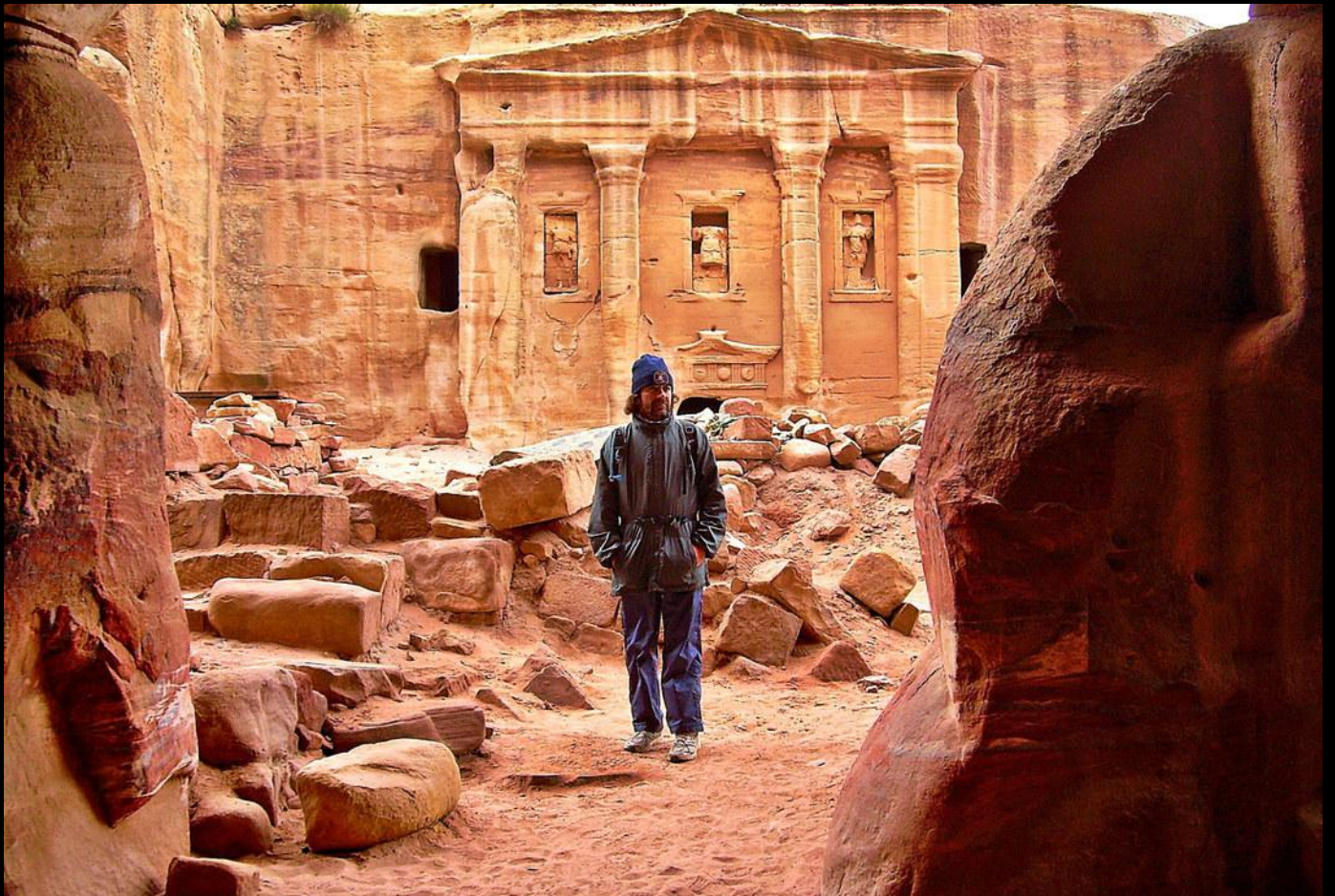
On our way back from the High Place of Sacrifice, a hailstorm forced us to take shelter in a tomb. I thought this was rather cool. Ernest thought it was rather cold. The rain continued all night, so we stayed an extra day, listening to the wind and contemplating our life choices.











Snowballs and Stone-Throwing Children

Leaving Petra involved climbing steeply out of Wadi Musa and then continuing uphill for the rest of the day, because Jordan apparently has no concept of “flat.” We encountered the infamous stone-throwing children, which mentally transported me straight back to Ethiopia. Ernest, ever the optimist, threw snowballs instead.

At At-Tafilah, we debated our route. The Dead Sea won because we believed it would be warmer. This was the kind of optimism that keeps travellers alive. We camped at a viewpoint overlooking barren mountains and the shimmering Dead Sea far below.









A Fast Descent and Aggressive Dogs

The next morning we hurtled downhill from 1,000 metres to 400 metres *below* sea level—the lowest place on earth. It was exhilarating, terrifying, and probably illegal in several countries.

We floated in the Dead Sea, which is less “swimming” and more “being forcibly buoyant.” Then we pitched our tents, mistakenly believing we were hidden. The local stray dogs disagreed. They barked, circled, and behaved as though auditioning for a horror film. Chasing them only alerted more dogs to our presence, which was not the desired outcome.





Amman, BBQ, and Bike Parts

The climb out of the Dead Sea valley to Amman was steep enough to make you question gravity. Halfway up, Peter and Jill spotted the South African sticker on Ernest's bags and invited us to a barbecue. This was the best thing that had happened to us in days. We ate, drank red wine, and were dropped off at our accommodation in a state of bliss.

Amman was cold, and we wore the same outfit for biking and sleeping, which is why I considered any room with a bathroom "heaven." I searched for a new rim but found nothing. My sister Amanda, along with Leon and Jaco at Cycle Maintenance Centre, saved the day by sending spares—and cup-a-soup, pasta sauce, jelly babies, and a buff for Ernest.





We visited Madaba and Mt Nebo, where Moses supposedly saw the promised land and died at 120. Life expectancy in Jordan was only 74, which suggests things have gone downhill since biblical times. There was nowhere to stand and say “Beam me up, Scotty,” which was disappointing.

The Parcel Arrives and All Is Well

Receiving a parcel is always thrilling, especially when it contains bike parts and snacks. The bike shop was friendly, if technologically limited, and by the next day our bikes were as good as new.













Face Cream, Border Nerves, and Goodbye Jordan

All smiles, we continued our journey towards Syria. The bikes ran well and the weather was good, making pedalling effortless. We were slightly apprehensive, not knowing what to expect and whether obtaining a visa at the border was even possible. We were thus ecstatic to learn they were, which felt like winning a small lottery. I bought face cream and a mask at the duty-free shop—essentials, obviously—and we found a room on the Syrian side to relax before exploring the next country.

And just like that, our short but memorable visit to Jordan came to an end.

Epilogue

We left Jordan the way one leaves a good book: reluctantly, slightly battered, and wondering how so much had happened in so few pages.

The hills had tested us, the Dead Sea had floated us, and Petra had humbled us. We'd been barked at by dogs, rescued by South Africans.

By the time we reached the Syrian border—faces moisturised, bikes repaired—we realised Jordan had been less a country and more a character: unpredictable, steep, generous, and unforgettable. And as we rolled into the next chapter, we carried with us the faint scent of hummus, desert wind, and the knowledge that sometimes the best journeys are the ones that insist on being uphill.



About this Book

About this Book

This chapter tells the story of my cycle ride through Jordan, travelling from Egypt towards Syria. There are countless possible routes through the country, and the one described here is just one option.

The distances

The daily distances in this book are not always the shortest routes between two points, as we occasionally wandered off course or took detours. However, the kilometres recorded each day were accurate according to my odometer.

Time of year and date

This chapter describes our cycle ride through Jordan between February and March 2008. Roads, weather, and conditions may have changed since then.

Insurance

A good travel insurance policy is essential to cover theft, loss, and medical emergencies. Some policies exclude 'dangerous activities,' including scuba diving, motorcycling, and trekking. Cycling might not be considered dangerous, but always check the small print to ensure your policy covers cycling activities.

Clothing

We spent most days in the saddle, so good-quality padded cycling shorts are worth every cent. I cycle in ordinary sandals, but any comfortable footwear will do. Summers, from May to September, are hot and dry, with temperatures averaging between 32C and 40C. Winter, from November to March, is much cooler, with temperatures averaging around 13C, although it can be downright freezing at higher elevations. Personal toiletries should include insect repellent and anti-chafe cream. I also strongly recommend wearing a cycling helmet.

The Bicycle

When choosing a bicycle for a long-distance ride, comfort matters more than anything else. I use a mountain bike with a Merida frame, Shimano Deore components, Alex wheel rims, and Schwalbe tyres. For carrying gear, I use Tubus bicycle racks and Ortlieb panniers. They are a little pricey, but well worth the investment in the long run. A handlebar phone holder is very useful for navigation. I use Organic Maps or Google Maps for this. A handlebar bag is another must-have, especially for carrying a camera and other items you may want within easy reach during the day.



About Jordan

Capital City

Amman, Jordan's lively capital, is the country's beating heart. Blending ancient history with modern energy, it offers a fascinating first glimpse into Jordan's culture, people, and everyday life.

Currency

Jordan's official currency is the Jordanian dinar (JOD), often written as JD. It is a strong and widely used currency, with 1 JD roughly equal to 1.41 US dollars.

Language

Arabic is the official language of Jordan and is spoken across the country in daily life, education, media, and government.

Religion

Religion plays an important role in Jordanian society. More than 92% of Jordanians practise Sunni Islam, while around 6% are Christian, adding to the country's rich cultural and religious diversity.

Location and Size

Jordan is located in southwest Asia and covers an area of 92,300 sq km (35,637 sq mi). The country stretches 562 km (349 mi) from northeast to southwest and 349 km (217 mi) from southeast to northwest. It borders Syria to the north, Iraq to the northeast, Saudi Arabia to the east and south, the Gulf of Aqaba to the southwest, and Israel to the west. In total, Jordan has 1,635 km (1,016 mi) of land borders and a coastline of 26 km (16 mi).

Population

Jordan's current population is about 10,300,000 people. With a population density of 115 people per sq km (298 people per sq mi), the country is home to a vibrant and growing society.



About the Author

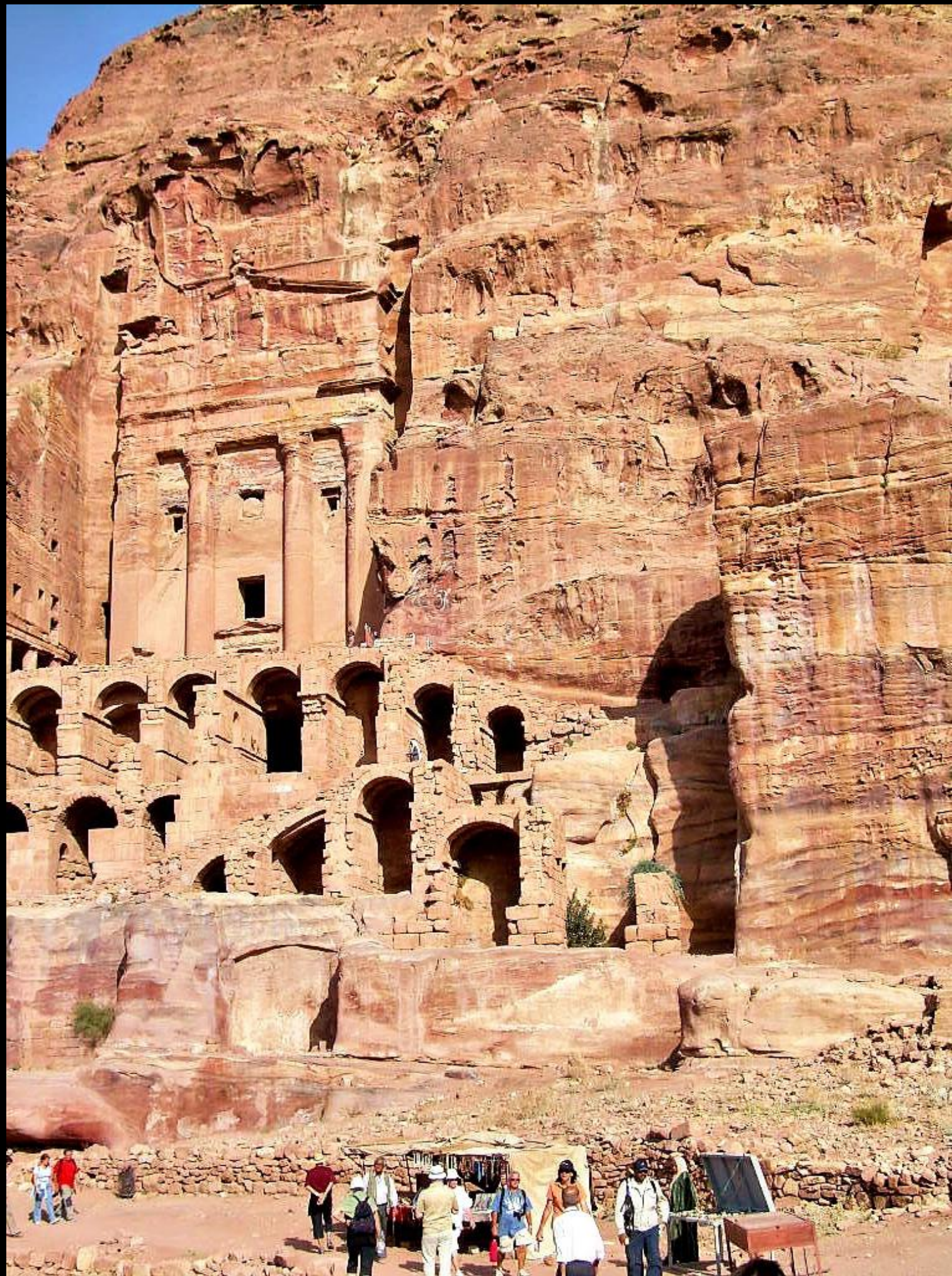
Hailing from the city of Cape Town, South Africa, Leana's journey into the world of cycling began not with years of training but with a single bold decision. In 2005, driven by curiosity and a spirit of adventure, she entered the Tour D'Afrique—a legendary mountain bike race stretching from Cairo to Cape Town. With little cycling experience, Leana purchased a bicycle, flew to Cairo, and set out on a route that would take her the entire distance from Cairo to Cape Town.

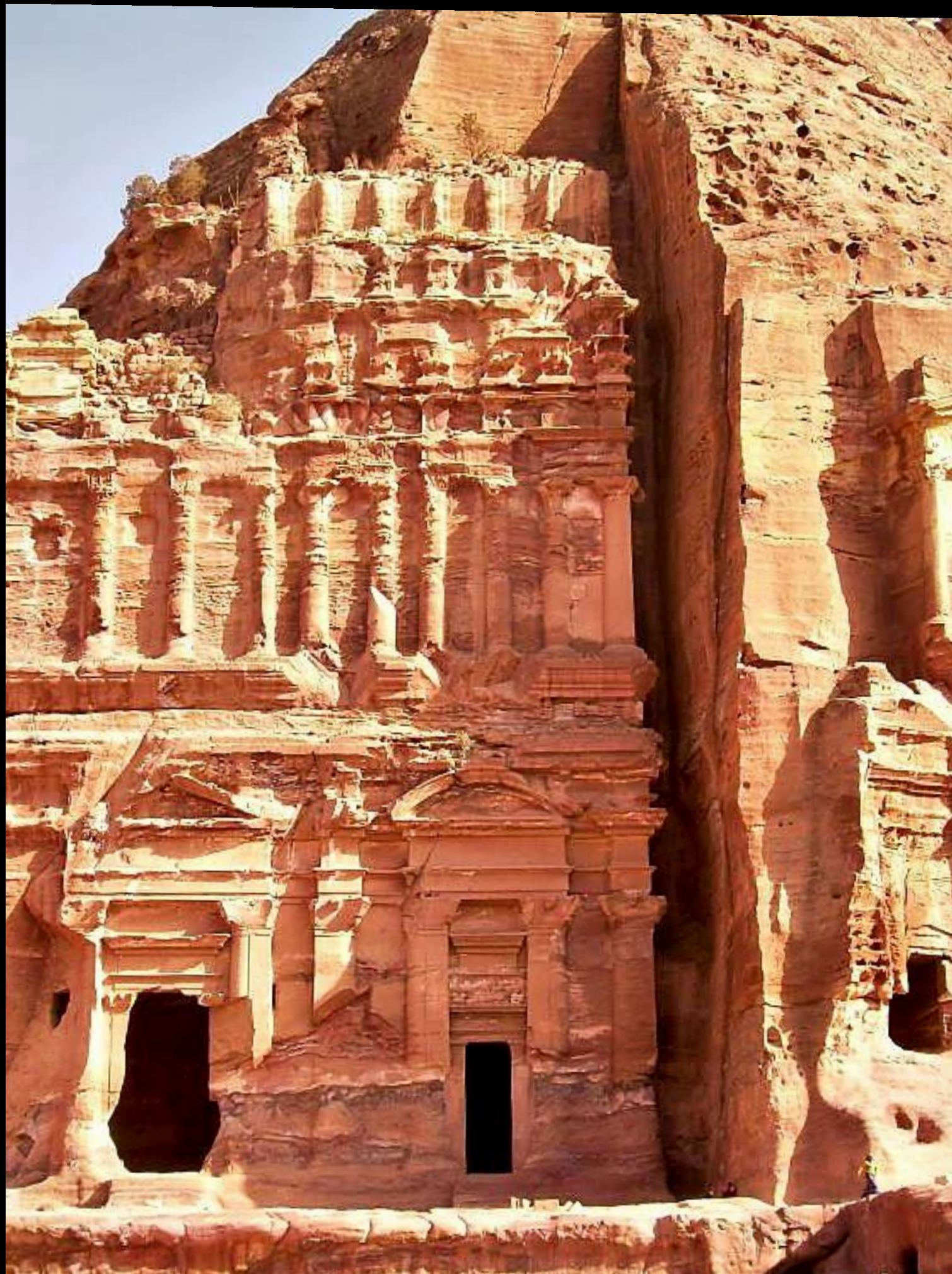
Returning home, Leana found that the rhythms of ordinary life could not compare to the freedom of the open road. The call of adventure proved irresistible, and in March 2007, she and her companion, Ernest Markwood, embarked on a journey that would evolve into a round-the-world cycling odyssey. Though they began together, the road eventually led them to discover their own unique directions—both in travel and in life.

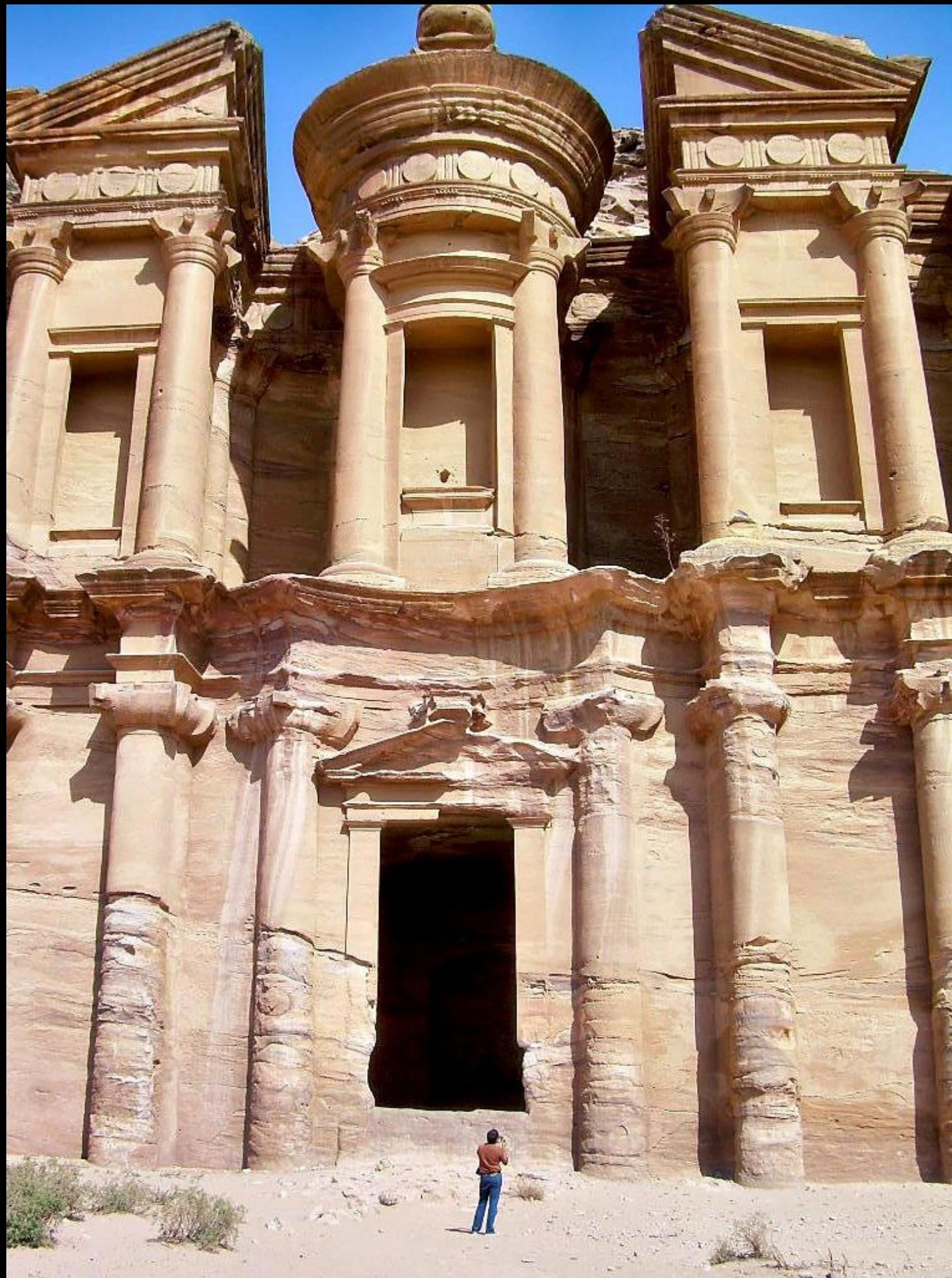
Leana's travels have taken her across Africa twice, through the Middle East, Europe, the United Kingdom, Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, the Indian subcontinent, China, Southeast Asia, and Australia. Her wanderlust then carried her to Ushuaia, Argentina, from where she cycled the length of South, Central, and North America over several years. Along the way, she explored many of the world's larger islands, including Cuba, Jamaica, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, South Korea, and Taiwan.

Today, Leana continues her adventures in Southeast Asia, ever inspired by the promise of new horizons and the enduring joy of life on two wheels.









It is the unknown around the corner that turns my wheels.



