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Seeking Bedouin: a narrative ethnography of lived culture and tourism imaginaries in Wadi Rum, Jordan

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Abstract

Wadi Rum is a UNESCO World Heritage Site known for its distinctive sandstone mountain formations, colourful desert plains, and ancient inscriptions signifying a long history of human habitation. It is also home to the local Bedouin population, traditionally nomadic and semi-nomadic peoples of the Arab world.

Traditional Bedouin practices have undergone rapid change through ongoing tourism development, modernization, and sedentarization processes. Simultaneously, tourism initiatives, various forms of digital representation, and historical narratives tend to lock Bedouin culture into a static, romanticized image, a process discussed in tourism literature as cultural commodification. In this process, essential Bedouin cultural traits, such as hospitality and connection to the land, are repeatedly invoked and idealised.

To understand these cultural transformations, this study turns to the frictions, alignments, and continuities between lived cultural practices and tourism imaginaries. Particular attention is given to how cultural identity, authenticity, and meanings of place are understood, experienced and constructed by individuals and communities in interaction with various external representations.

This thesis is an ethnographic study based on three weeks of fieldwork conducted in spring 2026. The fieldwork was approached through multi-sensory phenomenology, seeking embodied understanding of cultural practices and tourist encounters. To explore the relationship between lived culture and its representation in tourism narratives, the study incorporates netnography, examining various forms of digital material—travel blogs, tourism websites, social media content, and user-generated narratives—that shape expectations and interpretations of place before and during travel.

Furthermore, the study is situated within the tradition of narrative ethnography, which serves as the primary mode of expression and analysis.

The findings suggest that cultural values and practices exist simultaneously as commodified objects and deeply embedded dispositions actively enacted both within and beyond tourism encounters. Certain practices, while no longer essential for survival, continue to be maintained through leisure and recreational activities as a continuation of cultural identity. The study further proposes that dominant narratives, commodified images, and standardized forms of tourist experience can serve as points of differentiation against which alternative representations of cultural identity are constructed and expressed.

Methodologically, this thesis contributes to the growing body of innovative and experimental approaches to qualitative tourism research. It stresses the importance of embodied, sensory, and engaged understandings of place while considering the sociocultural contexts that shape lived experience, place attachment, and processes of meaning-making.

Dedication

To my mother and my brother, who have always given me a sense of home and unconditional support, wherever I was.

To the people of Wadi Rum, who welcomed me with unconditional generosity and created a lasting sense of home away from home.

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1. Introduction

Sun sets behind a ridge of towering, sharp, shadowed mountains. A flat red valley stretches towards vertical cliffs in distance. Beneath the cliffs, a village rests nestled, its dwelling lights flickering at dusk. In the middle of a valley, a Bedouin boy nudges a camel to rise, and the 3 camels behind follow the lead. A white scorpion bent into the shape of letter C steadily traverses over fine grains of sand. In distance, beneath monolith-like mountain walls, a small hiker-figure makes its way through Wadi Rum. [1]

In a video titled "Silent hiking 6 days in Wadi Rum desert – Jordan", popular vlogger Harmen Hoek, known for his stunning, cinematic shots, depicts his journey on foot through the unique desert landscape of southern Jordan. The 24-minute documentary, which boasts 1.5 million views on YouTube, was the initial spark which caused my interest in the region.

Digital content has the power to stir our imagination. It shapes our expectations, reveals desires, and ultimately influences our decisions. As Crang (2014, p. 74) notes, tourism is a phenomenon largely driven by "desire, fun, fantasy, and imagination". In the "economy of imagination," (Robinson, 2005, in Bott, 2013), the search for an authentic experience and authentic places often emerges as one of the primary drivers of this process. (Salet, 2021)

The Bedouin tribes have historically been represented in the literature as "the quintessential primitive or pre-urban society", through which romanticized imagery of the Bedouin culture prevailed in westerner's mind (Strachan, 2012, p. 51). While such images might exist in a captured moment in time, they fail to fully account for "the true tribal identity of the nomadic people" (Browning, 2013, p. 4).

Today, the majority of the Bedouin population of Wadi Rum, whose historically distinctive traits are nomadic and pastoral practices, is either directly or indirectly involved in the tourism industry. The drastic changes of the traditional Bedouin

[1] See Appendix B – digital material video sample 2.

lifeways which occurred through governmental tourism initiatives and broader global processes are documented and explored by a growing body of literature.

However, these discussions remain focused on external views of the culture. This was addressed by Tarawneh (2009) whose detailed ethnographic account is focused not on how the cultural group is perceived from the outside but rather on the way members of the group experience it in the context of ongoing sedentarization and modernization processes.

Yet, a culture cannot be isolated from its context and studied under a microscope as an isolated phenomenon. As Marinaki (2021, p. 140) writes, “the Bedouins seem to be balanced between global fantasies and local priorities.”

Existing research has examined tourism representations of Wadi Rum and the transformation of Bedouin lifeways under tourism development. Less attention has been paid to frictions, alignments and continuity between lived cultural practices and tourism imaginaries. The assumption which guides this research is the premise that tourist imaginaries must, to a certain degree, be based on lived cultural practices of the Bedouin, practices which are still performed in some form.

Therefore, the aim of this study is to explore the relationship between lived Bedouin cultural practices and tourism representations in Wadi Rum, with particular attention to how cultural identity, authenticity, and meanings of place are experienced and represented across different contexts.

This raises a central question: how are Bedouin cultural practices and meanings of place in Wadi Rum shaped through their relationship with tourism developments and tourism representations?

To address this question, the study combines multi-sensory phenomenology, narrative ethnography, and netnography. Together, these approaches make it

possible to examine both embodied experiences of Wadi Rum and the digital representations through which the destination is imagined and promoted.

Particular attention is paid to the role of the desert landscape itself. In Wadi Rum, cultural identity, tourism experiences, and representations are deeply intertwined with the spatial environment. The deep connection of culture and nature is evident in in the translation of the Arabic word for Bedouin - Badawy or bedu, meaning "inhabitant of the desert" (Strachan, 2012). Therefore, Wadi Rum presents a particularly valuable case to study the relationship between tourism narratives and embodied experience.

Considering that my own interest, fascination, and eventually experience of Wadi Rum itself were inspired by a YouTube video, it became evident to me that representational imaginaries would form an inevitable part of this discussion. While my fascination grew with each new encounter with digital sources ranging from Wikipedia and Reddit discussions to travel blogs and work-exchange platforms, I was simultaneously reading academic literature that critically examined and deconstructed many of the same representations. Rather than seeking to verify or dismiss these imaginaries, I set out to Wadi Rum to understand how Bedouin cultural practices are experienced and sustained in everyday life. What is the authentic Bedouin culture? What does it mean to be a Bedouin? How is the desert properly known and experienced?

2. Literature review

2.1. An overview of community-based tourism

Community-based tourism (CBT) is frequently presented as a sustainable alternative to mass tourism, particularly in rural and indigenous contexts where heavy reliance on tourism is closely intertwined with cultural heritage, local livelihoods, and environmental impacts (Jamal, 2016, p. 9). CBT has been highlighted as a model of local participation in tourism planning and management which seeks to ensure that the benefits are distributed fairly and re-invested into the community and sustainable development. (Shrestha). In this sense, it is understood as a form of tourism that is managed and owned by local communities, enabling them to participate directly in the development and operation of tourism initiatives (Jamal, 2016).

2.2. Community-based tourism in Wadi Rum

Covering 720 km^2 of protected landscape, Wadi Rum is a desert valley characterized by sandstone mountains, desert plains, and distinctive geological formations. It contains extensive archaeological remains and rock inscriptions documenting long-term human presence. (Al-Jazi et al., 2025). Due to its "outstanding universal value", it was designated a mixed natural and cultural UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2011 (UNESCO, 2026).

However, tourism developments predate Wadi Rum's history as a UNESCO designated site. The government of Jordan has worked towards the implementation of sustainable practices and community-based tourism in Wadi Rum through different initiatives such as "environmental-friendly accommodations, waste management plans, community-based tourism patterns, and legislation for the protection of natural and cultural heritage" (Alotaibi, 2026, p. 500).

Such efforts have produced varying social, economic and environmental impacts, through "introduction of various unfamiliar programs, including cultural, tourism, and construction initiatives" (Anzeh, Saleh, Safran, & Ledraa, 2025, p. 442). Relevant studies of sustainability goals and community-based practices by governmental bodies of Jordan demonstrate that their aims and objectives often failed to align with communal values, or to deliver the promised benefits (Brand, 2001). Strachan (2012) explores how the new visitor centre of Wadi Rum and the designated tourist administration changed the local industry in several significant ways that gave Bedouin clans reasons to question "the role of donors, management interests and competence". (ibid, p. 276)

Yet the complexity of impacts when governing initiatives direct touristic development of culturally significant places extends further. One example of an effort to introduce community-based tourism is Jordan Tourism Development Project, developed by USAID – Siyaha; "one comprehensive tourism development programme"[2] which seeks to "enrich the tourism experience at Wadi Rum by taking advantage of the cultural appeal of the unique Bedouin way of life in the desert" (Linda, 2006). While striving to include the local cooperatives into developmental programmes through the support of traditional Bedouin crafts, the project puts the enhanced tourist experience as the main objective, framing the unique Bedouin culture as a resource.

Similarly, Brand (2001, p. 575) highlighted the World Bank's Second Tourism Development Project, which emphasized "the importance of retaining and supporting the local lifestyle to ensure social sustainability as well as to use the local culture as a tourist attraction."

[2]"Siyaha, literally meaning tourism, is a three-year, $17million project working with the Jordanian government, local communities, NGOs and tourism-related institutions to develop a dynamic, competitive tourism industry in different locations within Jordan." (Tarawneh)

2.3. Cultural commodification and authenticity

A major impact of tourism on culture of a destination is “the transformation of the material and non-material forms of local culture” (Tarawneh). This transformation can be essentially categorized as either revitalization, which can be a positive change, or commodification. (ibid.)

Cultural commodification is a process “through which a society changes culture related practices, beliefs, and objects in order to fit the exigencies of the marketplace mainly due to demand from tourists.” (Shrestha). Greenwood (1989) notes that through commodification culture loses its original purpose. Through this process, authenticity of local culture itself can become a central attraction for visitors (Bott, New heights in climbing and tourism: Jordan's Wadi Rum, 2013); “In particular, “colorful” local costumes and customs, rituals and feasts, and folk and ethnic arts become touristic services or commodities, as they come to be performed or produced for touristic consumption.” (Cohen E. , 1988, p. 372)

Such framing of authentic culture represents one of Wang’s three conceptualisations of authenticity – the objectivist approach, which seeks the “realness” in measurable and verifiable authoritative definitions. (Brown, 2013) Salet (2021, p. 2) stresses the paradox of objective authenticity; “as tourists seek to find something that counts as “real” they are constantly met with commodified and artificial products that only provide a fleeting experience of this idea”

Wang’s second approach is the constructivist view, which deals with authenticity as a sociocultural construct, as different views produce ‘various versions of authenticities regarding the same object’ (Wang, 1999, p. 352). Finally, the postmodernist approach turns to the tourist and the subjective notions of existential authenticity, referring to a state in which tourists feel connected to their true selves through travel experiences (Brown, 2013).

Definitions of authenticity in tourism are various. MacCannell somewhat pessimistically depicts the modern tourist seeking authenticity eager to enter the "back regions" of tourism while damned to constant disappointment by staged performances (MacCannell, 1973)[3]. Cohen summarizes MacCannell's stance as suggestive of the fact that "commoditization, engendered by tourism, allegedly destroys not only the meaning of cultural products for the locals but, paradoxically, also for the tourists". (Cohen E. , 1988)

Questions of authenticity therefore become closely tied to intention. Cornet (1975) argues that whether a cultural product is perceived as authentic depends largely on whether it was created "specifically for the market" (Cohen E. , 1988). At the same time, the criteria through which authenticity is judged vary significantly between different modes of tourism experience.

Cohen notes that "existential" tourists who seek to distance themselves from modern life and immerse themselves in the world of the Other tend to pursue the most "purist" forms of authenticity, attempting to move furthest from established tourist routes and closer toward local ways of life. In this regard, Cohen compares such tourists to anthropologists and ethnographers. (Cohen E. , 1988)

The distinctions between various forms of authenticity, most broadly Wang's differentiation between objectivist, constructivist, and existential approaches, are all relevant to the context of Wadi Rum. Culture as fixed objects, various interpretations, and lived subjective experiences of visitors and locals intersect in complex ways to cast a different light on authenticity of place.

[3]"Such back regions are frequently inauthentic "false backs," insidiously staged for tourist consumption. Thus, for example, localities may be staged as being remote, or "non-touristic," in order to induce tourists to "discover" them (MacCannell 1973:594); and native inhabitants of "exotic" places are taught to "play the native" in order to appear "authentic" to the tourists (Cohen E. , 1988)

2.4. Representational production of Wadi Rum

The visual appeal of Wadi Rum's landscape plays a central role in attracting visitors (Mamoon, 2016), and is often highlighted in promotional materials as "Mars-like" and "from another planet" (Obeidat, 2015)[4]. The uniqueness of Wadi Rum's landscape is recognized not only by tourism enterprises, but by official conservational bodies as well. The official UNESCO website describes Wadi Rum as a globally recognized desert landscape renowned for its sandstone mountains, valleys, natural arches, dramatic cliffs, and vast vistas, emphasizing both the scale and visual diversity of the environment. (UNESCO, 2026)

The aesthetic, visual value of Wadi Rum is recognized by the filming industry too, with numerous movies, such as Lawrence of Arabia, Dune, and The Martian to name a few, having been filmed there (Al-Jazi, Almeida-García, Mercadé-Melé, & Parzych, 2025). This cinematic history is in turn widely utilized by public and private tourism organizations as a pull factor[5].

Through an analysis of online marketing publications, general and adventure-tourism specifically, Bott (2013, p. 26) points out to the perpetual representations of Wadi Rum as reproducing "Orientalist pre-conceptions of the Arab World" – "veils, camels, timeless". This entwines land and people as the unified object of romanticised authenticity. Bott (2013, p. 28) gives an example of "The Jordan Beauty" company which emphasises the people's connection to the land and 'inherent' qualities which make Bedouins ideal tourism hosts:

…"HOSPITALITY AND PROTECTION OF THE GUEST IS THE CODE AND THEME OF THE BEDOUIN LIFE." (Jordan Beauty, 2010–original emphasis)

Al-Jazi et. al. (2025) write that "one of the most important aspects of Bedouin culture is hospitality to the stranger or traveller." The values of Bedouin hospitality

[4] (Visit Jordan, 2026)
[5] An example (Rakan Wadi Rum, 2026)

and desert distinctiveness are therefore perpetuated not only through tourism marketing, but through academic literature as well. Albeit in varying levels of spectacularity and with different intentions, academic, conservational and touristic representations overlap in emphasizing cultural authenticity and spatial uniqueness and the link between the two as key characteristic of Wadi Rum.

2.5. Identity, differentiation, self-representation

The differentiation between the self and the other is pointed to by Crang as key to the identity of travellers; “backpackers who deride the collective travel and organized packages of Japanese tourists, about which they know little, but who form “imagined ghosts upon which to build difference narratives” (Crang, 2014)

The self does not necessarily have to be positioned in contrast with a different type of tourist. Bott (2013) explores how the climber tourist in Wadi Rum is enabled to experience his subjective authenticity primarily in contrast with the unique and exotic local, in the spatial context of harsh desert environment.

Identification through differentiation can also be applied to the context of the local community. Marinaki (2012) switches the perspective the other way and explores how the identity of Zalabieh Bedouin of Wadi Rum is constructed through contrasting with the “other” - the Western tourist and the “soft” urban dweller. Beyond the tourist-local dichotomy, Marinaki (2012) is interested how the identity of Zalabieh Bedouin exists as a continuous dialogue between desert and state. On one hand, they are independent, self-sufficient desert dwellers and at times disobedient citizens, and on the other, loyal servants of the government whose Bedouiness forms the basis of the Jordanian national identity itself.

This relational identity is embedded in a longer-standing political and cultural discourse in Jordan. Bedouin populations have simultaneously been framed as symbolic carriers of national identity and as a “national problem” due to their

cross-border tribal affiliations (Browning, 2013). Within Jordanian nation-state, Bedouin culture has therefore been selectively integrated into state narratives, in which tribal identity is mobilized as a marker of authenticity and national distinction (Layne, 1989). This has involved the promotion of an idealized Bedouin figure, often detached from contemporary social realities and reduced to romanticised imagery of desert life which misrepresents the profile of Bedouins in the modern world.

Layne (1989, p. 31) depicts how an exhibition in a community cultural centre, clearly directed at a local audience, exhibited artifacts of tribal life, but with little context: “The exhibition was clearly an exhibition of themselves to themselves, a classic collective representation. But this representation was expressed in a new form; a form appropriated from the dominant culture.”

Such fixed criteria indicates that “the terms by which a culture is defined at one point in time remains constant. However, culture is not static but is constantly adapting and expanding.” (Browning, 2013, p. 7)

Tarawneh (2009) emphasizes that not all socio-cultural changes of tribal groups are an outcome of governmental interventions, but rather of broader global systems, such as consumerism and capitalism, with “the most significant vehicles of transmission” being communication and tourism. (Tarawneh M. S., 2009, p. 26) As global processes reach the community, the bearers of culture themselves build their identity in dialogue with external interpretations and various influences:

“The Bedouins of the Jordan Valley define themselves in an environment full of other's definitions and evaluating commentaries and the Bedouin's views are entangled with these discourses.” (Layne, 1989, p. 34)[6]

[6]“Bakhtin's concept of dialogism - a word enters a dialogically agitated and tension-filled environment of alien words, value judgments and accents, weaves in and out of complex interrelationships, merges with some, recoils from others, intersects with yet a third group…” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 276)

2.6. Summary and research direction

A general overview of community-based tourism and specific case of Wadi Rum has been presented. It has been shown how governmental projects aiming to build community-based practices intersect with processes of cultural commodification, particularly through the highlighting of the "appeal of unique Bedouin culture" with tourism gain as the main objective. The discussion of authenticity explored the complexity of the topic and the various interpretations that this often-ill-defined term carries. It has been shown how cultural commodification can occur when authenticity is objectified and framed as a static product with economic, social, or political objectives.

Further, it has been discussed how promotional material of Wadi Rum are often framed within fixed imaginaries of a romanticised life in the desert and capitalize on the aesthetics of the locality's spatial features. It has also been explored how the unique spatial, historical, and political environment shapes the identity of place. Across these discussions, identity, authenticity, and representation emerge not as separate domains, but as mutually constitutive processes through which place, culture, and tourism continuously interact.

The focus of this study is not to determine whether CBT practices in Wadi Rum "work" or not. Rather, CBT offers a unique context to study the phenomena of authenticity, place production and cultural identity through the embodied experience and tourism narratives. The aim is thus to contribute to wider discussions of how tourism, and more specifically community-based tourism, impacts geographically and culturally distinct places, addressing the identified gap in qualitative, embodied research of such phenomena.[7]

[7] "Whereas economic and environmental indicators of tourism do lend themselves to objective measurement, the socio-cultural impacts are often highly qualitative and subjective in nature." (Tarawneh M. S., 2009, p. 419)

3. Theoretical framework

3.1 Habitus of culture and tourism

Lyons presents Bourdieu's notion of habitus as an often-inarticulate body of dispositions, "produced by the material conditions of existence in a society…Bourdieu compares a group following its habitus to an orchestra without a conductor." (Lyons, 1980, p. 234)

In tourism context, Crang presents various touristic practices and discourses as "habituses that feed into and enact different ways of being a tourist and cultures of tourism." (Crang, 2014, p. 73). Through the example of beach tourism, investment in physical appearance, and subsequent photo sharing, Crang indicates that habitus extends beyond in-situ practices, encompassing a priori and a posteriori dimension of tourism experience.

Campelo et. al (2014) understand sense of place as "genius loci, the atmosphere of place, as a shared sense of the spirit of the place". Their conceptualisation problematizes the separation of the representational and the non-representational, as both form part of the habitus. Thus, the habitus of tourism can be understood not only as embodied practices within a destination but also practices that relate to it beyond its immediate spatial and temporal context.

In the particular case of Wadi Rum, Marinaki (2021) focuses on the spatial determinants, contextualising the desert as the habitus of Zalabieh Bedouin, who derive their identity, self-confidence and knowledge from their bodily connection with the harsh physical environment; "This makes the physical space a primary factor for conscious, unconscious, and pre-conscious habitus, behaviours and construction of selves, a lived space, concrete and real, that co-creates the lived experience. The desert and its people interactively give meaning to each other; thus in the absence of these inhabitants the desert will quickly "drain of meaning"

(Marinaki, Between Desert and State: Power Relations and Balance Between Tradition and Modernity Among the Zalabieh Bedouins of Wadi Rum Desert, 2021, p. 147).

While Crang examines habitus in relation to tourist identity and touristic practices, Marinaki explores the relationship between spatial environment and the cultural identity of the local population. Both perspectives are relevant to this thesis, which lies at the intersection of lived culture and tourism representation, where the spatial characteristics of Wadi Rum play a central role in shaping both embodied practices and tourism imaginaries.

Informed by previously discussed concepts, this study considers how the habitus of the everyday life of Wadi Rum and the habitus of tourism activities interact and construct the notion of a place. Additionally, it considers how individual actors navigate between these overlapping structures. In this sense, the ethnographic encounter itself becomes part of the field of habitus, as the researcher attempts to interpret embodied practices and meanings that are often pre-conscious and difficult to articulate. (Marinaki, 2019, p. 1492)

3.2 Phenomenology of place and performance turn

Tourism research has often been critical of the differentiation between the self and the other, of the tourist gaze which embeds previously held assumptions onto a foreign, most often non-Western culture, reducing it to simplistic images and thus keeping it away from potential development and dynamic evolvement (Stone & Nyaupane, 2019). One of the critiques of tourist gaze theory points to its implication that this other is passive and has no independent subjectivity. (Stone & Nyaupane, 2019) In response to these critiques, tourism studies have increasingly shifted towards approaches that view both visitors and hosts as active agents shaping place through embodied practices and performances.

Rakic and Chambers (2012) lay out an overview of "performance turn" in tourism studies, a strain of thought which recognizes the embodied nature of tourists' consumption of places, moving away from the study of symbols and semiotics. The performance turn does not reject the study of representation but "seeks to also include and to legitimise the 'non-representational". (Rakic & Chambers, 2012, p. 1613).

As discussed in the literature on cultural identity, discourse occurs between various representations of Bedouin identity, and meaning is often negotiated between external and internal interpretations and influences. As such, performance turn "recognizes that these everyday performances take place within wider societal discourses." (Haldrup, 2010, p. 5)

The thesis approaches the phenomenon at hand with the premise that cognition occurs when "the body engages with the physical, cultural world…By embodiment we include a range of performances which are multi-sensory, corporeal and, importantly also emotional and cognitive." (Rakic & Chambers, Rethinking the consumption of places, 2012, p. 1629). This enables the study of place as a complex system of interactions of host and tourist performances arising within a specific context, as well as outside its spatial and temporal dimensions.[8] Thus, the differentiation between the self and the other is not understood as inherently negative, but as a constitutive aspect of meaning-making and embodied cognition, consistent with the construction of identity discussed in the literature.

3.3 Psychogeography as the embodied practice

In Cultural Geographies of Tourism, Crang problematizes the limitations of tourism research lacking concepts to grapple with tourism phenomena which are "largely driven by desire, fun, fantasy, and imagination". He stresses the need for a

[8] "places are not simply encountered…but are performed through embodied play…places are thus brought into being through systems of organised and/or informal tourist performances and 'host' performances" (Sheller, 2004, p. 4)

“language that speaks to the emotional life of tourism in terms that do not reduce it to motivational factors.” (Crang, 2014, p. 74)

Such language, although not utilized in tourism studies, can be found in psychogeography, a concept developed in 1957 by Guy Debord and the Situationist International, a system of “collecting information about our physical and emotional relationship to our urban environments via a process of dérive, or drifting”. (Zoe Rose Kriegler-Wenk, 2025). Psychogeography is a point where “psychology and geography collide, a means of exploring the behavioural impact of urban place.” (Cooper & Kruglikova, 2022, p. 2).

Fererre notes that “passing from an objective notion of “space” to a subjective concept of “place” is to take a step towards psychogeography, as it involves both the perception and the representation of one’s surroundings.” (Ferrere, 2020). As psychogeography concerns itself both with the embodied, emotional and cognitive experience of a place, and its representations, it is found to be particularly relevant to the dual domain of this study.

Cooper and Kruglikova point out that most of literature in psychogeography is concerned with urban spaces and their impacts on the individual and society. (ibid.) Through two case studies of indigenous communities, the authors demonstrate how the theoretical concept can be also applied to non-urban environments and novel landscapes, showcasing the environment’s fundamental influence on cultural identity, living spaces, mental wellbeing, emotional life, and belief systems.

This study applies theory of psychogeography to the context of Wadi Rum, geographically distinct non-urban area which shapes both the nature of everyday life and tourist encounters. This is done by taking into consideration the impact of the environment on attributed emotional meaning, cognitive interpretations,

cultural habits, tourist practices and movement patterns as markers of cultural identity, which in turn give meaning to space.

As Ferrere suggests, “in political terms, psychogeography is a defence of freedom of movement, while on the individual level, it is an emotional interpretation of the world, reinforcing the position of the individual in it (Ferrere, 2020, p. 45). This perspective is particularly relevant to Wadi Rum, where movement through the desert, attachment to land, and embodied navigation form important dimensions of both cultural and political identity, and tourist experience.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, ethnographic approach that combines elements of multi-sensory phenomenology as embodied engagement with the phenomena and narrative ethnography as the analytical style. Sensory tourism research highlights the importance of non-representational, embodied approaches to the study of mobilities, as experiences of travel and place emerge through sensory engagement with landscapes, including sound, temperature, rhythm, and movement through space (Jensen, Scarles, & Scott, 2015).

This perspective is particularly relevant in environments such as deserts, where sensory experiences—silence, vastness, season, and various forms of movement across the landscape—play a central role in shaping how individuals, both locals and visitors, perceive and experience place. Due to the aim of this study to seek out embodied, experiential knowledge, multi-sensory engagement seemed not only appropriate prior to the field trip but also emerged naturally throughout it.

4.1. Philosophy of science

This study is grounded in interpretive phenomenology within social research, which "seeks to overcome Cartesian epistemology that holds to a representational view of the mind and a mind-body dualism" (Given, 2008, p. 462).

It understands the human as a social, and sentient being that dwells in a world of common meanings, habits, and practices that are socially prior to the individual and are socially encountered (ibid.) However, this view does not necessarily enable what Rapport calls the "modish neo-structuralist imaging of social life as the playing out of impersonal systems of signification which are responsible for, which constitute, the individual self, depriving it of any status as "source and master of meaning" (Rapport, 1992, p. 20). In other words, it does not rob the individual of his agency to exercise influence upon or construct his sociocultural environment.

On the contrary, through his participation and interaction with other participants, he actively shapes it.

From an epistemological perspective, knowledge is understood as situated and obtained through lived experience and interaction in the field. This position aligns with phenomenological approaches that "focus on understanding practical worlds, skilled know-how, situated understanding, and embodied lived experiences." (Given, 2008, p. 463). Rather than striving for detached objectivity, the study acknowledges the researcher's presence and participation as integral to the process of knowledge production, which will be addressed in following sections.

4.2. Data collection

Fieldwork was conducted over a three-week period in Wadi Rum, Jordan, during which I resided in different places and moved between various sites and social settings (see 4.4. Fieldwork reflections). This enabled close engagement with everyday life, both within and beyond explicitly touristic contexts. The fieldwork involved participant observation, informal and unstructured interviews with hosts, camp owners, and other actors in the tourism sector, as well as locals not directly involved in tourism activities.

Given the qualitative and exploratory nature of the study, a purposive and flexible sampling strategy was adopted. Initial engagement focused on individuals and settings relevant to my hosts' surroundings and involvement with tourism. Further participant observation and informal interviews were shaped by opportunity and accessibility in the field. Encounters emerged through daily movement between camps, villages, and desert sites, as well as through introductions facilitated by local contacts. This resulted in opportunistic (convenience-based) sampling, where interactions were included based on situational availability and relevance to the research focus.

No strict numerical targets were set for interviews or observations. Instead, sampling was guided by thematic relevance, repeated exposure to social settings, and the gradual emergence of key themes during fieldwork, allowing iterative refinement of focus.

Residing in different contexts allowed a variety of perspectives on Wadi Rum and Bedouin culture to emerge—from non-Bedouin campsite owners and foreign campsite workers to Bedouins from three different families (clans) and individuals of different age groups.

Only three interviews were conducted in a more formal manner, documented through notetaking. Most valuable conversations and insights emerged without prior planning, often with individuals encountered the same day. Many participants were nevertheless eager to share their perspectives despite the brevity of the encounters.

While lacking formal structure, these interactions provided rich and unrestricted forms of expression. At times, attempts to introduce structured questions proved too abstract or detached from the everyday contexts in which conversations were taking place. This may reflect Marinaki's discussion of habitus, in which she questions "to what extent informants in the field can interpret their own habitus without making the trip out of the collective self and again return within it?" (Marinaki, 2019, p. 1492).

When discussions (and my questions) developed organically, topics emerged through shared situational interests, allowing for more pragmatic and contextually grounded insights. Both interlocutor and ethnographer remained engaged in embodied understanding that could be interpreted subsequently, rather than requiring conceptual distancing during the encounter. This approach appeared more

closely attuned to the dynamic and often unpredictable social rhythms of Wadi Rum.

Participant observation developed continuously throughout the fieldwork period, with individuals and interactions selected based on their embeddedness in everyday activities and presence in daily village dynamics, non-tourist Bedouin tents, and tourism industry involvement.

Physical material such as tourist guides, visit cards, and maps was collected where available. The material predominantly consists of official tourist brochures gathered from visitor centres. These provide insight into official and more traditional forms of tourism representation, serving as a backdrop to the digital materials discussed in the following section.

Sensory impressions were captured through audio, video, and photographic recording, of which a selected gallery is available in the appendices. These materials, which aimed to capture daily cultural practices and the surrounding environment, allow closer engagement with spatial and social dynamics of Wadi Rum.

Fieldnotes were the dominant form of data collection throughout the fieldtrip. A journal was kept daily, based on notes collected throughout the day and supplemented with recorded material as a reminder of events and important details. While digital recordings may provide a more immediate impression of lived experience, fieldnotes allow deeper analysis through detailed depictions of interlocutors' perspectives, daily events, and personal observations.

4.3. Data analysis

Through narrative ethnography, rather than relying solely on observation in the traditional sense, the research engages with what may be described as a shift from participant observation toward the observation of participation, emphasizing not

only the researcher's embodied and experiential involvement in the field, but also "epistemological reflections on fieldwork participation" (Tedlock, 1991, p. 77).

As Bott (2013, p. 25) notes, "Research involves the active construction of interpretations of experiences in the field, which should also question how these interpretations arise." Using narrative ethnography as a mode of both data analysis and thesis construction makes it possible to reflect on different factors that shaped the fieldwork process, influencing both how the research unfolded, the nature of the information gathered, and the subsequent process of interpretation.

Given (2008) states that "the process of narrative inquiry is composed of engaging with participants in the field, creating field texts, and writing both interim and final research texts." In this way, data collected in the form of fieldnotes evolves into analysis through ongoing engagement, subsequent insights, and multiple revisitations. The final outcome of this analytical process will be described more specifically at the beginning of the cultural analysis chapter.

The interpretive approach is further extended through the inclusion of digital materials, allowing the study of how Bedouin culture and tourism experiences are represented, circulated, and stabilized within online environments. In this sense, the research incorporates a netnographic component as the analysis of digitally mediated cultural production and meaning-making processes.

Following Kozinets' conceptualisation of netnography as a qualitative method for studying computer-mediated communication, the approach adopted here focuses on naturally occurring online data rather than elicited responses, allowing insight into how tourism imaginaries are constructed in publicly accessible digital spaces (Kozinets, 2015).

This acquires a more traditional understanding of netnography, as primarily interpretive and non-interventionist. In line with earlier formulations of

unobtrusive digital ethnography (Costello, McDermott, & Wallace, 2017), it does not seek to participate in or influence online communities but instead observes how cultural meanings are articulated through existing digital traces such as posts, images, reviews, and travel narratives.

The study draws on three interrelated categories of digital material:

• official representations produced by governmental and tourism institutions

• commercial and promotional content produced by campsites and local tourism operators (websites and Instagram accounts)

• user-generated content, including travel blogs and Reddit threads

These categories allow for a comparative reading of how authenticity, landscape, and Bedouin cultural identity are framed across institutional, commercial, and experiential perspectives. The aim is not to treat these as separate spheres, but to examine how they reproduce the construction of dominant tourism imaginaries.

Online material was collected prior to, during, and after fieldwork. This temporal spread allows netnography to function both as anticipatory framing of expectations and as a comparative reference point in the interpretation of field data. In 5.2.3. it will be addressed specifically how virtual representations encountered during the fieldtrip influenced present experience and impacted my perception of Wadi Rum.

As my own motivations and expectations were partly informed by these digital representations, engagement with online material formed not only a source of data, but also part of the broader context through which Wadi Rum was encountered and interpreted. In this sense, the reflective component of narrative ethnography extends beyond the field site itself and includes the digital environments of tourism imaginaries.

Since the research is concerned with the relationship between lived experience and tourism imaginaries, online representations provide insight into how authenticity,

mobility, and cultural identity are constructed in advance of, and in parallel with, physical experience in Wadi Rum. Through netnography, the study seeks to tackle the limitation of scope in tourism research which Crang notes often focuses exclusively on "a case study of a destination and in a destination." (Crang, 2014, p. 74).

In addition to fieldwork and netnographic material, selected academic texts relevant to both digital representations of Wadi Rum and cultural practices of the Bedouin may also be incorporated into the analysis, to provide a more nuanced understanding of the phenomena at hand.

In this sense, the triangular methodological approach engages with both representational and non-representational dimensions of the phenomenon, contributing to more experimental and hybrid forms of tourism research (Jensen, Scarles, & Scott, 2015). By combining attention to lived, embodied experience with its mediated representations, the study explores how Bedouin culture is both practiced in everyday life and constructed through tourism narratives. The analysis follows an abductive approach, moving iteratively between fieldwork observations, netnographic material, and theoretical concepts to interpret emerging themes.

4.4. Data corpus

Fieldwork generated approximately 90 pages of fieldnotes written over a 21-day period. Informal conversations and interviews involved around 50 individuals, including camp owners, hosts, guides, tourism workers, volunteers, tourists and residents of Wadi Rum. Out of this sample, 3 conversations were documented as more formal interviews through detailed notetaking. In addition, 131 photographs, 12 video recordings, and 3 audio recordings were collected as supplementary material.

Netnographic material consisted of 5 institutional tourism websites, approximately 15 campsite and tour operator websites and 10 Instagram accounts, 10 travel blogs, and 8 online discussion threads.[9]

4.5. Fieldwork reflections

Although short, my stay in Wadi Rum, and more broadly in Jordan, consisted of several stages and unfolded across distinctly different settings. These included a residence in a village household, a work exchange as a shepherd in a non-tourist camp, a work exchange in a luxury campsite, independent hiking and wild camping, and subsequent visits to Petra and Aqaba. Since my role was not only that of a researcher, but also of a volunteer, a tourist, and a hiker, within this relatively brief time I made meaningful relationships and experienced memorable encounters that unfolded outside of purely transactional tourist contexts. This left a long-lasting impression of my time in Wadi Rum, impression which inevitably intersected with the process of writing this thesis.

As Given (2008) notes, "in studying and understanding experience narratively, researchers recognize the centrality of relationships, the relationships among participants and researchers, and the relationships of experiences studied through and over time and in unique places and multilayered contexts."

As I navigated between my own experiences, my hosts' perspectives and lifeways, and the tourism representations that had originally sparked my interest in Wadi Rum, questions emerged regarding the relationship between personal involvement and critical analysis.

During the examination of literature on tourism representations, I noticed a recurring tendency to interpret both representations and lived experiences of Wadi Rum primarily through the prism of Orientalist tropes and tourist gaze. While such

[9] This section structure was prompted with GAI tool ChatGPT. The structure was then revised and content was incorporated autonomously

critiques offer valuable insights, they can also risk positioning local actors chiefly as recipients of externally imposed identities, while underestimating their capacity for self-representation and active participation in the construction of cultural identity.

My own engagement with the people and places of Wadi Rum encouraged me to approach these interpretations critically. Rather than diminishing scientific rigour, the desire to honour the culture and pay respect to the individuals who welcomed me into their homes demanded that they be approached first as people, and only then as representatives of broader cultural processes. In this sense, personal involvement became not an alternative to critical analysis, but a motivation for deeper engagement with both lived experiences and their representations. As Boylorn (2016) reflected on H. L. "Bud" Goodall's work in narrative ethnography, the goal is to "communicate freely and write ethically."

Additionally, ethnographer's own preferences inevitably impact the direction of research and positionality. My own preferences lied with strictly non-tourist, everyday rhythms of Wadi Rum, a preference which might have impacted my experience of tourist performances and subsequent interpretations of the same. However, it was through engagement with both academic literature and reflections on my experience that I came to understand that authenticity extends and permeates throughout various tourist encounters and is complicated by its shapeshifting appearance.

Lastly, some of the periods I considered would be primarily for personal endeavours "outside of" fieldwork, became the most fruitful periods of knowledge production. For example, my final four days of hiking and wild camping in Wadi Rum—turned out to be an informative period of gathering valuable insights from numerous locals (guides, shepherds, campsite owners) and visitors.

As personal intersects with observational, narrative ethnography finds expression for this process.

4.6. Positionality, limitations, advantages

Opinions presented in this thesis are individual and are not representative of Wadi Rum's population as a whole. Rather, the variety of perspectives encountered demonstrates that what it means to be Bedouin, what constitutes an experience of Wadi Rum and how it is to be represented are all subject to multiple interpretations.

Furthermore, during my fieldwork, which I conducted at the beginning of what is usually considered high season, Jordan's tourism sector had suffered to a drastic extent due to the regional conflict unfolding around its borders and over its airspace (Syndicate, 2026). With the COVID-19 pandemic, Israel's war on Gaza, and the ongoing conflict in the region, Jordan's tourism sector had suffered a streak of bad luck for the last 5 years (ibid.). These effects were clear, even for someone visiting Jordan for the first time; numerous camps empty, coffee shops closed, the port of Aqaba strangely quiet, Bedouins of Petra idly waiting for the small number of tourists to offer camel tours to.

While this context is not representative of typical tourism dynamics, it enabled a closer relationship with locals, as well as an opportunity to experience Wadi Rum and Petra in the relative absence of large tourist crowds.

Additionally, the language barrier presented itself as a challenge. I often found myself among locals, appreciative of their openness, yet unable to understand their conversations. I used ChatGPT's voice-to-text transliteration extensively, which enabled valuable and memorable exchanges. However, communal interactions remained only partially accessible. Hosts would occasionally translate and explain context, but the dynamic nature of group conversations limited this. Nevertheless,

individual conversations and participation in gatherings provided meaningful insights, as the language-barrier motivated me to remain focused on the embodied practices, individual interactions, and non-verbal communication.

4.7. Ethical considerations

Only the names of interlocutors who have given explicit consent for the use of their names will be stated throughout the analysis. The identities of other relevant participants, whose consent for name usage was not explicitly obtained, will be anonymized.

Baker (2008) underlies the potential invasion of privacy of the people who are posting messages as the primary ethical concern of netnographic research; “Are they aware that what they post can be published as part of a research study?” (Given, 2008, p. 906) In this study, netnographic analysis is limited to publicly accessible materials, including tourism websites, travel blogs, forum discussions. These sources are approached as part of the public circulation of tourism narratives rather than as private expressions, and no private, restricted, or anonymised spaces were accessed.

5. Cultural analysis

The collected data has been organized into three primary thematic categories: the tourist, the community, and the desert. Each theme represents a cluster of interconnected phenomena and reflects a distinct dimension of Bedouin life in Wadi Rum. These categories are not understood as fixed or isolated domains, but rather as analytical lenses through which the complex relationships shaping everyday life and touristic experience can be examined.

This thematic structure emerged through the process of engaging with and reflecting on the fieldwork material and relevant literature, rather than being predetermined. Together, the three themes make it possible to capture the sociocultural and spatial dynamics that constitute the lived reality of Wadi Rum, as well as the ways in which these dynamics are encountered and experienced by visitors. Given the interconnected nature of these dimensions, certain observations inevitably cut across multiple themes, which highlights the fluid and relational character of the phenomena under study.

Each of the analytical themes presents fieldwork data through several key “scenes” that reconstruct and summarize field notes into a multi-sensory depiction.

I say reconstruct, as certain parts deemed unnecessary will be omitted, and necessary clarifications made for a clearer understanding of the context. Such reconstructions result in a structure resembling what Ottenberg calls his "headnotes", and what Cohen called "headlines”. (Cohen A. P., 1992, p. 344) For Ottenberg, headnotes come to acquire greater importance than the fieldnotes themselves, which are “the driving force” behind the final text (ibid.)

Throughout the analysis, notable interactions and stances will be referenced. While the utilization of scenes enables visualisation of the embodied experience,

individual stances and conversations complement the analysis as cognitive[10] interpretations.

Netnographic data, collected both priorly, during, and subsequently to the fieldtrip, will be presented and analysed alongside the fieldwork material within relevant themes and subthemes.

Where necessary, the reader is invited to consult the appendices for relevant excerpts of digital material.

5.1. Community

5.1.1. Hospitality as embodied practice

> "Bedouin hospitality precedes these ancient tribes; the Bedouin people will ensure guests eat before they do, no matter if food is sparse. A guest can stay with the Bedouin for up to three days with no questions asked – only after three days will their hosts ask what their business or intentions are." (Williamson, 2025)

Previous excerpt from Trafalgar, a worldwide travel advice website, contains a summary of a Bedouin tradition of which the roots are tightly interwoven with Islamic conduct. (741, 2026) This brief representation of a longstanding rule is a common highlight in tourism promotion.

Scene 1. Eid al-Fitr [11]

> *It was a wide garden of a house, with a dozen of olive trees and a date palm, and a 3-sided covered tent. A fireplace was in the middle, with 4 red rugs set around it in a square. Men were coming and going, all friends, all cousins from the village, and at one point there were around 15 of us there. A shot of Bedouin coffee and a full cup of tea was offered to each new guest.*

[10] "As Gibbs (2006, p.9) states with regards to cognition, it is what occurs when the body engages the physical, cultural world and must be studied in terms of the dynamic interactions between people and the environment…We must not assume cognition to be purely internal, symbolic, computational and disembodied, but seek out the gross and detailed ways that language and thought are inextricably shaped by embodied action." (Rakic & Chambers, Rethinking the consumption of places, 2012)

[11] See Appendix A Selected Photographs Figure 6.

Every time someone new came, everyone got up to wish a happy Eid. This was done by a soft handshake and 2 or 3 kisses on the same cheek, accompanied by an exchange of good wishes.

Ahmad, my host and the sheikh of Salihiyah village, brought a big tray with lamb and vegetables, pita bread, and a few cups of yoghurt. Raised voices began as some people refused to eat, rubbing their bellies to indicate fulness. Ahmad did not want to hear of it, gesturing for them to eat. Then it became a discussion of who should eat first, everyone putting themselves last.

New people came. I started getting up from the ground, but they pulled me back and said, "sit, sit, not when you eat, you greet later."

As we ate, Ahmad also remained seated, exchanging warm greetings with those who arrived, making sure they knew he was aware of their arrival.

The previous scene depicts events from Eid al-Fitr, one of the two most important Islamic holidays in the year, which fell on the second day of my arrival to Salihiyah village. While the scene depicts a celebratory occasion, it nevertheless highlights how guests were welcomed daily.

Shared meals, and more specifically prioritizing that the guest is well fed before one's own needs, were central ways in which generosity was expressed, both towards me as a foreigner and among Bedouins themselves.

Scene 2. Side-by-side tourism

H did not want to hear about payment, even though I insisted.

"I don't want anything from you. This is hospitality." He wrote to me.

H, a Bedouin from the Zawaideh family, hosted me in his tourist camp for two nights.

On the first night, the dinner was served in a spacious restaurant, from a buffet abounding in variety of traditional and non-traditional options. H came over to my table, made sure I was satisfied, and left without eating.

After dinner, a group of Palestinian tourists gathered around a large table near the campfire, with loud Arab music playing as they laughed, cheered, and children ran around.

I sat about a dozen meters away, near the reception area with several Bedouins, gathered around a hookah, and tea served from huge iron teapots by H's young cousins. H and his brothers managed the camp together, although he appeared to hold a central, more reserved position, sitting calmly and speaking little. One of H's brothers moved between us and entertaining the Palestinian family, while K and others made remarks and chuckled among themselves.

The event described in Scene 1 unfolded in Salihiyah village, which sits outside touristically active zones. In contrast, H's camp was located in a relatively active area of Wadi Rum, with a dozen jeeps passing in the vicinity, carrying tourists to sunset spots over the weekend. The dinner was served in a strikingly different setting – cutlery, tables and chairs, the buffet itself, kitchen staff ready to accommodate. Yet, similarly to Ahmad, H made sure his guests are well-fed and eat before him, embodying the practice represented by Trafalgar travel website.

Tarawneh (2009, p. 415) highlights the reluctance of Bedouins to discuss or quantify the monetary value of overnight stays, reflecting a tendency to resist the economic objectification of hospitality. H's statement "this is hospitality" echoes this orientation. Over the rest of my stay in Wadi Rum, across different settings, I was repeatedly invited to share meals where people gathered on the ground around a common tray. This was done without any expectations of payment.

The Zawaideh Bedouin gathering, which seemed to unfold separately from the touristic activities, within its own circle, followed similar social rhythms to that of Al-Suwailhiyin clan of Salihiyah village - suggesting continuity in everyday forms of hospitality across differing contexts.

Most members of the Zawaideh family reside within Disah village, which is one of the biggest settlements within Wadi Rum. As Woolsey (2026) notes in her extensive reflection on fieldwork in search of poetry in Wadi Rum, in Disah, every meal is served from communal metal bowls, around which everyone gathers,

sitting cross-legged or kneeling on the floor. This, Woolsey notes, is one of the remenants of past nomadic life which the Zawaideh Bedouins are unwilling to relinquish despite modern conveniences.

5.1.2. Social order and boundaries

"In the case of receiving visitors from outside their Khamsa (fifth-generation family), the conventional sex segregation takes place…The process of food preparation is exclusively the Bedouin women's activity. In polygamous households, cooking is done by the first wife, since it is a prestigious activity for women." (Tarawneh M. S., 2009, p. 196)

During my stay in Wadi Rum, cooked meals were regularly brought on trays from back rooms in houses, or from separate tents in non-touristic camp settings, to which I had no access. In line with Tarawneh's descriptions, my own observations, and several conversations, communal gatherings of men and women remained clearly structured through social separation.

This was particularly emphasized by the chief manager of the visitor centre, who framed this separation as central to Bedouin culture:

> *"here in Wadi Rum Bedouins like to separate their lives from tourism. Not in Petra. There they mix with tourists. They mix with women. For us a man is a man, and a woman is a woman."*

Although his statement referred both to gender segregation and to the separation of tourism from everyday life, the two issues appeared closely connected, as tourism inevitably increased interaction with external values and practices.

One campsite with a substantial Instagram following (26k) addressed solo female travellers directly:

"FOR WOMEN TRAVELLING SOLO IN WADI RUM?

-you can feel completely safe here

-our team welcomes every guest with professionalism, respect and genuine care

-hospitality is part of our culture – and your comfort is our priority"[12]

These forms of online representation can be understood as a response to the growing awareness of destination safety and the increasing role of online discussions in shaping travellers' perceptions. Online discussions on forums such as Reddit's r/femaletravellers frequently emphasize the importance of choosing reputable camps and guides.[13] Reputation therefore appears closely tied not only to individual camps and hosts, but also Wadi Rum as a destination.

What such promotional material of Wadi Rum tourist campsites presents is that Bedouin hospitality is simultaneously historical and contemporary. In other words, they imply that inclusiveness and hospitality are not produced in an effort to appeal, but rather exist as authentic, embedded social practices which happen to coincide with modern lifestyle.

Marinaki (2021) reflects on how openness and inclusivity interact with cultural norms and customs in the field. As a foreign woman, she was permitted forms of access unavailable to local Bedouin women, such as observing camel races up close, while the latter could only do so from afar. This may suggest that the chief manager's statement that "Bedouins like to separate their lives from tourism" reflects ongoing efforts to preserve certain cultural practices and social boundaries. At the same time, guests are welcomed into the home of the host and invited to engage in many aspects of everyday communal life, gender-related boundaries notwithstanding.

Reflecting on my own experience, I came to agree with Tarawneh's (2009, p. 430) observation that Bedouins, while strongly adhering to their faith, are often willing to openly discuss differences and seek common ground so long as certain

[12] See Appendix B – Figure 1 and Figure 2
[13] See Appendix B – Figure 3

boundaries are respected. Ahmad expressed this directly: “What you do is none of my business. Yes, I can talk to you about Islam, but your religion is your religion.” Previous discussions indicated that while inclusivity is both represented in tourism promotion and practiced in the field, there exists a strong intention to preserve existing social order as it is, and to distinguish clearly between cultures.

5.1.3. Authority and territoriality

In a video titled “Silent hiking 6 days in Wadi Rum”, popular Youtuber Harman Hoek depicts scenes from a day spent with the Bedouins. Judging by the number of individuals present, as well as the celebratory clothes and the meal with lamb meat prepared (mansaf), the gathering occurred during Eid holiday. In one scene, Bedouin men are shown with rifles, shooting into the air as boys around them observe curiously.[14] This representation induces a sense of adventurousness, fun and celebration.

However, weaponry had more than a symbolic meaning, as Strachan (2012) notes one of her Bedouin interviewees stated that it is a Bedouin tradition to carry weapons while travelling, for protection from wild animals or drug smugglers. This was stated in an outcry against the prohibition of hunting in 2002. My perception of weaponry usage was similar to that depicted by Hoek - symbolically and celebratory. For the rest of my stay in Wadi Rum, I have at times seen men carrying firearm and daggers, stored in vests or by the waist belt.

Scene 3. Trained in the military

> *One evening, I sat with several men in the house of Ahmad’s grandfather. There was a man dressed non-traditionally, unlike the others, in skinny jeans and a leather jacket. Ahmad told me he was a sheikh from another village. Smiling and laughing frequently, he referred to himself as the “sheikh of hashish.” M gave him his gun. He took it and demonstrated how to pull it*

[14] See Appendix B – digital video sample 2. and figure 4

out, spin it, disarm, and fire. He was highly skilled, which he demonstrated with conviction, confidence and playfulness. A man sitting next to me took my phone for translation, spoke in Arabic, and returned it. I read: "this man was trained in the military."

Historically, a big portion of Bedouins of Wadi Rum and the rest of Jordan have been employed in the state military and as police officers. (Browning, 2013) Several of the men I talked to were retired military personnel, although I was unaware whether and to which degree there were those still in active service. The sheikh described in the previous scene performed an impressive exhibition of his weaponry skills, which was much enjoyed and admired by those around. While the performance could be interpreted as a display of authority, I ascribe its purpose rather to that of communal enjoyment and storytelling, practices which will be explored further in the following subchapter.

Despite the visible presence of weaponry, Salihiyah village and wider Wadi Rum felt peaceful and secure throughout my stay. I was reassured of my safety and security on numerous occasions, especially in light of the conflict in neighbouring countries which could be heard in the airspace.

The impression of weapons being used mainly performatively was, however, challenged by an external perspective. During my one-week volunteering tenure in a luxury camp nearby Disah village, I had a conversation with my co-worker Mou, a young student from Amman.

Scene 4. The outsider perspective

We sat on a flat cliff overlooking the great white valley in front of us. From here we also saw that our own camp, like the others, had its territory marked by a slight elevation in the sand - an embankment.

"It has similar purpose to drywall in Croatia" I said.

"It's dangerous to cross those borders as the Bedouins take it very seriously." Mou said. "Imagine 3 Bedouins coming to you with guns."

"What is this, Texas?" I asked jokingly, not really persuaded.

"It's worse than Texas."
"But they are welcoming and friendly."
"To you as a foreigner, yes. But to us from the city...They live in the past - the past before they were united, when they raided each other's villages. There are many murders, but they are not publicized to not damage the reputation of the place."

Woolsey (2026) notes that urban Jordanians often view Bedouin tribes as backward and underdeveloped, a historically embedded stereotype. This indicates that different backgrounds, assumptions and consumed media (e.g. Hoek's vlog) determine how a culture will be experienced and perceived. While Mou ascribed the Bedouin territoriality to their historical practices, ironically Tarawneh (2009) tracks demarcation of land as a modern practice, a byproduct of rapid sedentarization and tourism developments which occured in the 1980s. Tarawneh further analyses how together with the shift toward territorialism, the Bedouin attitude drifted away from collectivism and towards individualism, as they became private property owners. (ibid. p. 418)

As such, tourism-related practices do not only co-exist side-by-side cultural values (see 5.1.1.), but rather noticeably interact with the way of life of the local population (see 5.1.2.).

5.1.4. Expression, discourse, individuality

Scene 5. Storytelling

There was an older man that seemed to speak with a lot of authority and when he talked everyone fell silent. It was the same when Ahmad spoke, and at some point, he was telling a story with such immersive facial expressions and hand gestures and voice fluctuations that I almost believed I could understand him. Everyone remained silent and listened to him attentively.

Several ethnographic works have approached Bedouin identity as something constructed through discourse shaped by political, spatial, and sociocultural determinants (see Marinaki (2021), Layne (1989)). Within this framework, Bedouins are sometimes implicitly positioned as passive subjects of external

forces. Strachan (2012, p. 20) addressed this explicitly in connection to tourism developments in Wadi Rum;

“It became very clear to me during all phases of my investigation that they do not identify themselves as innocent by-standers nor victims. In fact, if the men and women I know were to be confronted with this observation, they would be deeply offended.”

Taking the discussion further to the realm of communal discourse, Rapport (1992) analyses the reports of Smadar Lavie on Mzeina Bedouin of South Synai, Egypt. Lavie explores how through telling a mundane event from his life infused with cultural anecdotes, the sheikh of the tribe would overcome the political and social paradoxes that shape Mzeina tribal identity.

Rapport (1992, p. 19) concludes that it is precisely the creativity and charisma of certain individuals—“powerful soloists” endowed with “persuasive dramatic power”—that enables social coherence and the continued relevance of tradition. Identity, in this sense, is not merely imposed through discourse but actively sustained through performative acts of narration. Keohane stresses that the oral tradition is vital to the continuation of Bedouin society in Wadi Rum. (Woolsey, 2026) It enables cultural self-awareness, as a mode through which the non-literate Bedouin could remember their own history. (ibid.) In my own observations, textual literature did not appear to occupy a comparable role.

In one conversation, Ahmad stated directly that “Bedouin don’t like to read.” When asked whether he himself read, he explained that he sometimes reads the Quran but avoids other books because he does not know the author and therefore cannot trust their intentions, as “maybe he or she is crazy.”

When discussing philosophy, Ahmad asked, “what is philosophy? It is this,” while pointing to me, to himself, to children around us. “Everyone makes his philosophy.

Maybe I had a hard life and something I wrote does not make sense to you if you had an easy life." By contrast, Quran was written by God and therefore applicable to all. He pointed to the book next to me and asked what it was. It was a language book, "*Arabic for Dummies"*. "Okay, that is good too. Quran and for learning languages".

Taken together, these observations, alongside the discussed literature, highlight the centrality of performed oral tradition in Bedouin communities. Additionally, Ahmad's conception of philosophy indicates it is understood pragmatically, as an embodied practice, rather than abstraction or theory, which each individual appropriates according to his or her own experience and context. In this way, with philosophy as a skilled know-how, and oral tradition its inscription, an individual's expression empowers the sense of community. The apparent shift towards individualism due to modern occurrences such as tourism development (see 5.1.3.), does not necessarily hinder collective identity.

5.1.5. Temporalities

"No schedules.
No rush.
Just life moving the way it always has."[15]

The excerpt above is taken from a campsite's Instagram post. The video shows a herd of goats and a Bedouin moving slowly along the main road of Rum village. Several Toyota jeeps pass by and briefly obscure the view of the herd.

The description closely echoes Mahadin and Burns (2007) on Orientalist motifs in tourism representation, particularly the motif of "timeless." Wadi Rum is frequently framed in tourism imagery as a place where life remains unchanged. As discussed in previous subthemes, many cultural practices do indeed appear continuous. This impression persists despite visible infrastructures such as jeeps,

[15] See Appendix B figure 5.

smartphones used for recording, and paved roads, which alternately recede into the background and enter the foreground of experience.

Woolsey (2026) reimagines how „the daily rhythms of ancient Bedouin life provided the setting and the time for this oral literature to be told and retold—every night, with the family gathered around the fire, there is little to do in the middle of the pitch-black desert besides tell stories."

Woolsey further notes that the "oral tradition may not be "as central or vibrant as it once was, yet it also has not completely dissolved."

To understand more fully how daily cultural practices come to interact with and are shaped by present-day material conditions, it is beneficial to also turn to settings that most closely resemble older pastoral arrangements.

Scene 6. Mi casa e su casa

> *Ib's tent stood in a narrow valley opposite a steep reddish mountain rising into the clear sky. We sat inside on carpets around the campfire at noon while the sun scorched the valley outside. I met Ib while walking toward Lawrence's House. He approached me while herding around thirty goats and sheep and invited me to his tent for tea.*
>
> *Near the attraction stood a small coffee shop with a generator, Wi-Fi, and various souvenirs. Two Bedouins sat on carpet floor of the shop scrolling through their smartphones and smoking hookah. The caretaker energetically offered souvenirs to two French tourists. He also provided tea to all of us, repeating "mi casa es su casa". After charging my phone I left the coffee shop and found Ib's tent, "behind the mountain", as he had explained.*
>
> *Ib's wife brought tea on a tray from a separate tent. As we sat and spoke intermittently over tea, several of Ib's sons, of which there were 7, arrived with Toyota jeeps, briefly speaking among themselves and with Ib, before driving off again. "You see, like birds," Ib remarked as they dispersed. All his sons worked in tourism, mostly as guides, while Ib himself remained primarily a shepherd, though he occasionally hosted tourists in his tent. He explained that people were suffering due to the low number of tourists.*

Before I left, Ib said: "If you want, you can come work with me, live with me, eat with me. When we move the tent, we move together."

Pastoral nomadism remains a traditional Bedouin activity, though it has declined drastically with sedentarization and the expansion of tourism-based livelihoods. It is still practiced by some families in Wadi Rum, particularly older men. The sight of Bedouin herders moving across valleys with flocks of sheep and goats remains a daily occurence. At the same time, it is increasingly situated alongside visible tourist infrastructures, such as jeeps and marked routes.

A Bedouin saying citated by Browning (2013, p. 52) states: "My father rode a camel, I shall ride a pickup and my son will drive a Cadillac; however, my grandson will drive a donkey."

Ib's tent lay just several hundred meters from the coffee shop and Lawrence's house. Within this short distance, two distinct temporal logics coexisted, shaping movement, rhythm, and social interaction. While Ib lived as a pastoral nomad, his sons introduced a temporal contradiction in the form of jeeps. Within the coffee shop tent, tea was served traditionally and the locals sat on the ground, tourists sat on the couches, while both had their gadgets charging next to a power outlet. The line between modern-traditional, ancient-contemporary, tourism-local space dichotomies was blurred.

5.2. Tourist

5.2.1. Staged performances

Scene 7. The train ride

> *A man dressed like an explorer—wide-brimmed hat, moustache, beige shirt and trousers—approaches us and asks: "tickets please." Another man follows with a card machine. As we board the train, I am suddenly overwhelmed by the number of tourists. Around me are visitors from across the world—two women from the United States, a French couple travelling by motorcycle, a group of Chinese tourists laughing and taking photographs to the well-practiced jokes of our guide.*
>
> *The train departs through a wide desert valley, passing "Mars settlement" camps scattered beneath the rugged mountains of Wadi Rum. The metallic clacking of rail wheels cuts through the steady desert wind. Stuntmen, several of whom I recognise from the village, move between the wagons dressed as soldiers. Soon, horse riders appear in the distance carrying a large flag, followed by an ambush of the train and simulated gunfire from both sides.*
>
> *A militaristic jeep approaches. My host stands on it dressed in a white thobe and red-checkered headscarf, holding a rifle. The train stops, and I am briefly "kidnapped" together with a Chinese tourist before being theatrically returned to the wagon. Shortly afterwards, the train arrives at the historical station and the experience concludes.*[16]

The previous scene depicts a staged reenactment of attacks on Ottoman Hejaz railway carried out by Bedouin tribes during the First World War. This historical background, however, was not explained prior to the tour itself. The performance instead relied primarily on visual immersion, spectacle, and atmosphere. Organised by the Jordan Heritage Revival Company (JHRC), the experience is presented on Tripadvisor as an opportunity to encounter "authentic, engaging, and entertaining

[16] See Appendix A Selected Photographs Figure 9.

experiences" that "bring the ancient civilizations that once populated Jordanian soil to life" (JHRC, 2026)

The objectives of the organization closely mirror the logic of tourism development programmes discussed in the literature review, which seek to enrich tourism in Wadi Rum through the cultural appeal of Bedouin desert life. Additionally, "Journey through 1916" train show functions on what Browning (2013, p. 7) identifies as a common assumption on which the criteria of objective authenticity relies: "the terms by which a culture is defined at one point in time remains constant" In this case, selected symbols of Bedouin history—tribal warfare, desert mobility, weaponry, and Ottoman resistance—are extracted from broader social realities and repackaged into a visually recognisable narrative of cultural authenticity.

Discussing purposefully designated Bedouin camps around Wadi Rum Rest House, Tarawneh (2009, p. 402) draws on Boniface and Fowler's concept of "extra-authenticity":

"Tourists want extra-authenticity, that which is better than reality. They want a fantastic experience. They want stimulation...through simulation of life ways as we would wish them to be or to have been in the past." [17]

As such, these performances also depend upon tourist expectations, desires, suspension of disbelief, and finally participation. Tourists knowingly participate in staged simulations while simultaneously engaging with them as meaningful experiences. Positive reviews on Tripadvisor frequently praised the scenery, professionalism, and excitement of the performance, while a few dissatisfied visitors primarily criticised the lack of historical context. The dissatisfaction

[17] "Visitors to Rum can meet local Bedouins….and listen to them speak of a full moon so bright that they had to cover their eyes from being blinded! (an excerpt from official tourist guide obtained from Visitor Centre, see Appendix A Selected photographs Figure 1)

expressed regarding the absence of backstory may be related to what Cohen identifies as a more "purist" type of tourists, travellers which seek a deeper sense of historical or cultural immersion beyond spectacle alone.

Similarly, one travel blog, despite describing the experience as "super touristy," nevertheless praised the "magical Wadi Rum spheres" and the opportunity to gain a feeling for "those days." (Jacomijn, 2026)

However, the performance of "those days" is simultaneously surrounded by futuristic, luxury "Mars settlements" which point towards not only drastically different visual imaginations but also another temporality. Authenticity in this context thus appeared less connected to factual reconstruction than to the co-production of atmosphere, spectacle, successful immersion and the distinctive appeal of the landscape.

5.2.2. Landscape appeal

"The view says it all"[18]

The excerpt above is taken from a campsite's Instagram post, accompanying a photograph of luxury tents set against a red, flat valley stretching toward uniquely, geometrically shaped mountains in the distance.

This form of representation reflects a recurring pattern in tourism marketing in Wadi Rum, where landscape visibility and panoramic aesthetics function as central forms of value and attraction. As one of Tarawneh's (2009, p. 418) interviewees notes, with the expansion and systematization of tourism, land increasingly acquired material value alongside its social and emotional significance. Together with previously discussed shifts toward territoriality and individualism (see 5.1.3), these developments contributed to processes of privatization, as individuals began to seek formal ownership in order to participate in tourism economies.

[18] See Appendix B – Figure 6.

This materialistic outlook was also reflected upon by Mou, my co-worker at a luxury campsite, whose critique of Bedouin territoriality was discussed in subchapter 5.1.3.

> "Imagine, we might be the first ones to climb here," Mou said.
> "What about all the people who lived here before?" I asked.
> "Property owners don't care about hiking or what's behind them. Look—this is what they care about," he replied, turning back and pointing towards the view: "jeep tours, camel rides, and fifteen dinars".[19]

While Mou's critique primarily concerned Bedouins of Wadi Rum, it also resonated with the campsite's owners' perspectives, who were Jordanians from Aqaba.

Scene 8. Good view

> *On the third day of my stay, the camp owners arrived from Aqaba, marking a sudden shift in atmosphere and rhythm. After a brief greeting, they immediately began working, moving through the site to water and reposition plants. I spoke with R, one of the owner brothers, to clarify my tasks. We paused briefly and looked out over the landscape.*
> *"Good view," I said. It was, in fact, an extraordinary panorama.*
> *"Good? It's incredible. Compared to other camps, it's the best," he replied before continuing work.*

R's perspective indicates not only a shift toward the understanding of the landscape as a material value, but also toward a competitive logic of comparison between sites.

The preceding discussion does not suggest that emotional attachment to land has diminished, or that Bedouin and non-Bedouin campsite hosts of Wadi Rum embody an exclusively competitive mindset. As Cole and Altorki (1998, in Tarawneh, 2009) note, the sales of land to outsiders is considered as selling of a part of their identity, which indicates that a strong symbolic, cultural meaning of

[19] See Appendix A Selected photographs Figure 10.

land persists. Rather, it shows how alongside cultural and personal importance, land has also come to be understood through material registers as a commodity, and as a comparative economic object, building upon its distinct character.

5.2.3. Virtual representations and lived experience

> "The same place at the same moment will be experienced differently by different people; the same place, at different moments will be experienced differently by the same person; the same person may even, at a given moment, hold conflicting feelings about a place." (Tilley, 2006, p. 7, in Rakic and Chambers (2012))

As explored in subchapter 5.2.1, both tourists and local actors engage in situated performances that produce recognisable and repeatable representations of Wadi Rum. However, these processes do not unfold only in situ; they are also continuously circulated and reconfigured through digital media.

In their overview of place consumption, Rakic and Chambers (2012) describe tourists as "co-producers of places," who actively reproduce spatial meaning through storytelling, photography, and online content. In Wadi Rum, this co-production is particularly visible on Instagram, where the desert is continuously reconstructed through images of adventure, spectacle, and authenticity.

This circulation of representations becomes especially visible in the gap between promotional imagery, lived experience, and retrospective imagination.

Scene 9. Tomorrowland

> *Mg showed me the camp's Instagram page, depicting large groups of guests gathered around a campfire, a DJ playing a mix of Arabic and Western music. The camp also heavily posted previous meditation retreats for Arab women from Israel, who would occasionally rent the entire site. He then showed me his own videos from an electronic music festival under the "Tomorrowland" umbrella, held both in Wadi Rum and Petra. I looked out*

and saw the empty camp, knowing that all other camps around us are empty too.[20]

This virtual reconstruction involved multiple actors operating across different temporalities. Mg had attended the festival one year earlier, experiencing the same location under entirely different atmospheric conditions. Camp management produced promotional material centered on themes such as authenticity, spirituality, and "finding your true self." Retreat participants and festival visitors further reproduced these representations through their own photographs and videos—camel rides, jeep tours, Bedouin clothing, campfires, and desert sunsets. These circulating images also shaped my own expectations, allowing me to imagine an alternative Wadi Rum and to compare it with the present experience.

Another domain of virtual representation emerged through cinematic production. Many of the locals I met, particularly from Al-Suwailhiyin family, were involved in film projects as stuntmen, extras, and occasionally in main roles (Theeb, 2026). Abd, a cousin of Ahmad, showed me a scene from a desert film set that I had previously seen on his Instagram without understanding its context. The scene depicted him and another actor lying "dead" beside a burning car.

Reflecting on my own Instagram posts during fieldwork, I became increasingly aware of how visual material was interpreted outside the region. When I shared footage from the train ride performance, several viewers expressed concern, asking whether I was safe and assuming I was near an active conflict zone, despite the visible presence of tourists, horsemen, and staged performers. Detached from its context, imagery of staged tourism and film production left considerable room for reinterpretation, often shaped by broader media narratives of conflict in the Middle East.

[20] See Appendix B Figure 7. and Figure 8.

Yet the schism between representation and lived reality unfolded differently in practice. While Instagram feeds of tourists, Bedouins, and camps were saturated with images of adventure and activity, less visible was the noticeable decrease in activities and tourist numbers. Numerous practices associated with tourist performances, such as music nights and stargazing events, were not taking place during the period of fieldwork.

This was addressed during a brief conversation with the chief manager of the visitor centre.

> *"You came at the worst time."*
> *"I know, it's unfortunate."*
> *"One day when Trump dies, you come back inshallah."*
> *"I will, inshallah." I replied.*

While social media depictions of festivals and full camps offered images of Wadi Rum as it had been experienced at other moments in time, conversations about more prosperous periods similarly enabled imagination of how the place might be experienced in the future.[21]

5.2.4. What is (not) Wadi Rum

Building on previous discussions of place as co-constructed by multiple actors and temporalities, it becomes evident that notions of authenticity are not only shaped through images, performances, and digital circulation, but also through individual beliefs and social contexts.

This became particularly visible during an informal interview with Khalid, a Zawaideh Bedouin, and an owner of a campsite himself. The interview was conducted in a quiet camp of his cousin. After preparing shisha and serving tea,

[21] McCabe and Marson (2006) seek to show how the social construction and experience of place and space is more long lasting than the 'fleeting' and 'momentary glimpse' originally suggested by Urry in the Tourist Gaze (1990). Rather, they argue that the social construction of space, place, and identity occurs 'a priori, in situ and a posteriori' (Rakic & Chambers, Rethinking the consumption of places, 2012)

Khalid said “you can now ask me anything”, openly. As we firstly discussed my current experience volunteering at the 5-star campsite managed by non-Bedouins, Khalid was quick to express dissatisfaction with the way such large-scale luxury campsites operated. In his view, it was impossible to maintain meaningful relations with guests when hosting “a hundred, or two hundred of them.”

A few days earlier, one of the owners of the luxury camp had spoken about expanding the site to “50, 60, maybe even 80” rooms, alongside plans to introduce leisure facilities such as gaming and entertainment spaces.

Similar critiques of large-scale camps were voiced by two Zalabieh Bedouins, as well as my previous host Ahmad from Al-Suwailhiyin family. While these concerns appear infrastructural, they also reflect a broader unease with the transformation of hospitality into a scalable service.

Khalid also questioned the use of bubble tents, which he viewed as having nothing to do with Bedouin tradition. His own tent rooms were simply decorated, although they had private toilets and regular beds, which is not a common feature of traditional tents. This he showed me on Facebook, which I was able to access despite no reception, as Khalid shared his Starlink hotspot with me.[22] He stated clearly that he did not have AC in the rooms either, a feature that did not diminish guest satisfaction, as reflected in online reviews emphasizing authenticity.[23]

Concerns also extended to curated entertainment. Khalid criticised staged performances such as dance shows, which were popular among guests from urban Jordan and other Arab countries. In contrast, a video shown to me by the luxury camp owner featured a live band performing in the camp. To my question of what kind of music they played, his answer was: “Arab, pop… everything”[24]. The lack

[22] Many Bedouin campsite owners embraced Starlink satellite network as a practical solution to the often weak or non-existing signal in the desert

[23] See Appendix B Figure 9 and Figure 10

[24] See Appendix B Figure 8

of specificity in describing musical styles suggested a flexible rather than tradition-oriented approach to entertainment programming.

Such music performances recall Bott's (2013) discussion of staged tourism spectacles, where decontextualized performances risk detaching tourism from local cultural practices, framing an image of the "native local".

Several informants similarly expressed frustration with visitors from urban Jordan and other Arab countries, who were described as more demanding in terms of comfort and entertainment, and less interested in a "real" Bedouin experience. In this sense, Wadi Rum can be understood less as a site of cultural encounter and more, as Löfgren (1999) suggests, as a form of "territorialized hedonism," where ordinary social norms are temporarily suspended. (Löfgren, 1999, p. 269, in Crang, 2014).[25]

A related concern, shared by both Ahmad and Khalid, was the employment of foreign workers from countries such as Egypt. This was not directed at individuals themselves but rather reflects the labour demands created by large-scale operations. By contrast, Khalid operates his camp together with his brothers, and sometimes cousins if the workload is high.

Beyond questions of scale and service, a more fundamental distinction emerges in how Wadi Rum is defined and bounded. Two Zalabieh Bedouins I met hiking through the central protected area, had even stricter definitions of what constitutes an authentic experience of Wadi Rum. Ha referred to the areas outside of the Zalabieh family influence as the "fake Wadi Rum", while Ei stated explicitly that Wadi Rum starts from the visitor centre.[26] Both articulated these views immediately after I explained my research, suggesting a readiness to position their

[25]As Shields (1991) suggests, such liminal tourism spaces become environments in which play, leisure, and escapism are actively expected. The concept of territorialized hedonism and expected entertainment also recalls music festivals depicted in the prior subchapter

[26] With the visitor centre marking the official entry into WRPA, and Seven Pillars of Wisdom lying next to it, the Zalabieh family live within the touristically most active zone of Wadi Rum.

own understanding of the area. In addition, Ha was, similarly to Ahmad, determined on providing an authentic experience to his guests, even using the word authentic explicitly.

Taken together, these accounts suggest that authenticity in Wadi Rum operates on multiple, sometimes overlapping registers. On the one hand, it functions as a mechanism of differentiation within a competitive tourism economy, shaping how camps, families, and regions position themselves in relation to one another. On the other hand, authenticity is also articulated through affective and historical attachments that exceed purely economic logic. For many interlocutors, presenting Wadi Rum "properly" is not only a matter of attracting visitors, but also of honouring lineage, land, and inherited forms of life.

While a staged and monetizable performance, the "Journey through 1916" train ride can also be understood as an act of homage to the ancestors of the actors involved, for whom portraying the historical events of their forefathers may carry a sense of honour.

Rather than contradicting the material and staged dimensions discussed in previous subchapters, such expression reveal that the same practices—whether hosting tourists, staging performances, or managing landscape-based experiences—can simultaneously be embedded in economic, social, and moral frameworks.

5.3. Desert

5.3.1. Mapping, naming

As Crang (2014) notes, displays and language are not only descriptive but also performative of place, turning landscapes into legible circuits of meaning. This process is referred to as "sacralization."[27]

Within Wadi Rum, this sacralization of space operates through multiple overlapping systems. First, official toponyms embedded in physical tourist maps and digital maps combine descriptive and historical references, ranging from natural designations such as "Mushroom Rock", "the big red sand dune" or "Valley of Colors" to sites linked to T.E. Lawrence, his literary works and the movie Lawrence of Arabia. Such toponyms, overshadowing local names[28], function as interpretative cues, guiding attention and shaping itineraries of consumption. As in the case of the train ride show, deeper backstories were often scarce, and made possible only through verbal storytelling from Bedouin guides themselves.[29] While this leaves a vacuum of context, it opens way to subjective interpretations and fantasy.[30]

A second layer emerges through the naming practices of tourist infrastructure itself. Camps across the desert are frequently designated in English and framed through aesthetic or experiential branding, with frequent use of common associations (e.g. nomad, luxury, adventure, magic)[31], situating accommodation within the same logic of spatial legibility as natural landmarks. While on one hand this might have a categorizing function, it also guides expectations of the experience in advance.

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[27] "…sacralization often depends on texts and stories that circulate elsewhere or around the site so that our sense of having visited somewhere special is premised upon other signs and texts…there is a phantom landscape of associations underlying the one we see, where "the production of hereness in the absence of actualities depends increasingly on virtualities" so that we travel to actual destinations to experience virtual places (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998, in Crang)

[28] See Appendix A Selected photographs Figure 2

[29] See Appendix C Maps Figure 4

[30] Orientalist motives, cinematic references, futuristic elements – see 2.4. Representational production of Wadi Rum

[31] See Appendix C Maps Figure 5

Such forms of sacralization attach globally recognizable meanings to the landscape, allowing tourists to encounter Wadi Rum through already familiar cultural imaginaries. Departing from their campsite, tourists embark on a typical jeep tour from one site to another, and thus space becomes engraved with physical markers (e.g. jeep tracks) which create a curated field of movement and meaning.

The establishment of sightseeing pathways was noted by Chatelard, who wrote:

> "The area frequented by tourists in the desert is not very wide(roughly 15 by 20 kilometres) and can become relatively crowded during the high Spring and Autumn seasons when up to 300 visitors go back and forth daily from one spot to the other by jeeps, on camel-back or on foot…At the end of their tours, tourists are brought back to the rest-house and the time comes for buying souvenirs" (2001, pp.9-11, in Tarawneh, 2009)

Dominant and well-established routes of sightseeing are addressed by Wadi Rum Trail project which through an organized thru hike seeks "a viable alternative to the 4x4 tours and often heavily stylized Bedouin cultural experiences that dominate its tourism today." (Wadi Rum Trail, 2026). As such, guided long-distance hiking is framed as a viable alternative to mitigate cultural commodification of pathways.

My own hiking experience through Wadi Rum was constructed around main attractions, as well as lesser known and at times localities whose names remained unknown to me. In the absence of formal hiking infrastructure beyond general routes such as the Jordan Trail and Wadi Rum Trail, my itinerary was assembled through a combination of several blog posts, forum discussions, local guidance, and emerging familiarity with the landscape. Over time, this produced a personal cartography which combined main attractions of Wadi Rum with custom-made pathways between them. As my movement on foot intersected with jeep tracks and pastoral footpaths, the map similarly intersects with other systems of movement,

illustrating how personal spatial meaning may at times align with, and at other times diverge from, established pathways.[32]

In the proximity of major attractions, the presence of coffee shops, available signal, jeeps, and visitors reflected the concentration of tourism infrastructure. Yet movement on foot between these sites often involved prolonged passages through silence and relative isolation, where navigational certainty depended less on visible infrastructure and more on embodied orientation and accumulated familiarity with the terrain.

5.3.2. Freedom of movement

Previous discussion showed how movement is structured through associated meaning and popular places of interest, as well as how alternative routes emerge to initiate new spatial understanding. The following section examines how these representational structures interact with the comparatively open spatial mobility experienced in the field.

In the physical guide obtained from the Visitor Centre, it is stated that "Wadi Rum can offer to its visitors a chance to test their skills and build their leadership abilities through a wide variety of activities that begin from the Wadi Rum Visitor Centre."[33] Such framing positions the Visitor Centre as the official point of departure for all movement through the desert, emphasizing organized activities such as jeep and camel tours discussed in the previous subchapter.

This impression was further reinforced by local guides promoting guided excursions to arriving tourists. On one occasion, I overheard a guide explaining to a tourist group that it was not possible to move through the desert without a guide.

In practice, however, independent hiking and wild camping did not appear to be treated as problematic by the Bedouins I encountered. Limited areas of access were

[32] See Appendix C Maps Figure 1
[33] See Appendix A Selected Photographs Figure 3

few, and one's choice of direction through different valleys is largely unrestricted. Instead, movement was structured less through formal restriction than through informal social monitoring and recognition. One of the most common (and first) questions asked by guides and locals throughout Wadi Rum was: "What is your camp?" After naming a campsite or pointing toward my tent, the questioning usually ended without issue.

This informal regulation culminates at the Visitor Centre, where it becomes partially institutionalized. The visitor is required to report to a police office where similar inquiries about accommodation are made, with additional questions about the date of arrival and duration of stay. Once answered, the questioning ceases briefly. While explicit restrictions on movement were largely absent, such encounters nevertheless contributed to an impression that movement through Wadi Rum was expected to remain socially legible and traceable.

This differs significantly from Petra, where movement is materially enclosed and formally regulated. Entry occurs only through designated gates, movement follows marked routes, certain trails officially require guides and are controlled by noticeable presence of military.[34] Overnight stays are prohibited and the site closes after sunset, despite local Bedouins continuing to offer cave accommodation outside official regulations. Additionally, tour guides in Petra promote their services far more intensively, a contrast to which the dynamic of the Visitor centre in Wadi Rum bears only slight resemblance.

While Petra is experienced as a tightly controlled heritage site, Wadi Rum allows considerably greater spatial freedom, provided one understands the informal social codes through which movement is negotiated.

[34]See Appendix C Maps Figure 4

5.3.3. (In)hospitality of the desert

Beyond shaping movement through named landmarks, informal social cues and tourist itineraries, representations of Wadi Rum also structure expectations of encounters in the spatial setting, particularly through imaginaries of danger, survival, and Bedouin hospitality.

> *"Bedouins are most famous for their hospitality, and it is part of their creed—rooted in the harshness of desert life—that no traveller is turned away."* (kinghussein, 2026)

As discussed in 5.1.1. hospitality is widely framed as one of the defining characteristics of Bedouin culture. The previous excerpt, published on the official website of Jordan's royal house, draws a direct connection between hospitality and the harsh spatial conditions of desert life. Similar explanations circulate heavily through tourism promotion and online representations of Bedouin culture.

One travel blog describing nomadic hospitality across desert regions explains that:

> "In desert tribes, hospitality is not a gesture of kindness. It is a social rule tied to survival…Across the Sahara and other arid regions, refusing hospitality has historically meant risking death." (Diaries of a nomad, 2026)

Such representations, which often put stress on survival, construct the desert simultaneously as inhospitable and socially binding, where mutual assistance becomes a moral obligation. Yet contemporary experiences of the desert are also deeply shaped by modern infrastructure and tourism-related mobility. Jeeps, mobile phones, campsites, coffee shops (see 5.1.5. Temporality), and the growing presence of residents traversing the landscape make movement through Wadi Rum considerably more accessible than such representations often imply.

Scene 10. Water for the traveller

> *"Do you need anything? Food? Water?" Ei asked me from his jeep.*
> *Seeing that I hesitated to ask, he stepped out without another word, opened the back of the vehicle, and handed me two large bottles of water. He then*

> *gave me his phone number and said: "If you need anything, we are here, we will help you. Goodbye." He returned to the jeep and drove off across the valley toward Rum village.*

Two popular travel blogs on independent hiking in Wadi Rum depict similar experiences of social encounters while hiking. Gene (2026) reflects on approaching a Bedouin tent to ask for water:

> "But before I could do any of that, I saw a man wave me down from a distance, calling out through the unobstructed air.
> "WATER? DO YOU NEED?!"
> …After adjusting my pack in preparation to head out, Habib told me, "If you need anything, you come back here. We are brothers." and sent me on my way."[35]

It is thus implied that the traveller embarks on a dangerous journey. Generosity was often accompanied by reminders that the desert should not be underestimated. Throughout my stay in Wadi Rum, I was repeatedly warned of its dangers, most often associated with wildlife—wolves, scorpions, and snakes. These dangers were however interpreted differently by different interlocutors. Before arriving in Wadi Rum, T, a Jordanian woman from Amman, told me:

> "It is not the snake that is dangerous, but humans. The snake will sense you, and if you are fine, it turns away."

By contrast, a Bedouin head of a family, who hosted me in his tent before my last night of wild camping, responded without hesitation when I asked what to do if I encountered a snake:

> "Kill it. The snake is dangerous. If it comes close to our children or our sheep, so it is better to kill it."

These contrasting perspectives reflected different relationships to wilderness. Whereas T approached Wadi Rum through ideals of ecological harmony and existential experience, AB's perspective was grounded in everyday pragmaticism, prioritising humans, family and livestock. Wildlife was understood either as part of

[35] See Hoek (2022) for the second example

a shared environment or as a direct threat to livelihood and safety of the population.[36] These contrasting interpretations suggest that the perception and experience of the desert, much like perceptions of Bedouin values (see 5.1.3. scene 4), are mediated through differing cultural assumptions, personal backgrounds, and practical relationships to the environment.

The recurring warnings surrounding my wild camping experience increasingly shaped an anticipatory sense of the desert as dangerous and unpredictable. Yet as these anticipated dangers repeatedly failed to materialise, they stood in contrast to the continual presence of assistance, food, shelter, water, and guidance provided by locals. In this way, the inhospitable environment became a space which enabled and even highlighted the expression of cultural values of hospitality and generosity. Wadi Rum was simultaneously represented (both digitally and immediately) as an inhospitable space of existential threat—wildlife, dehydration, dangerous falls—and, paradoxically, experienced as a hospitable environment in which the traveller is cared for.

5.3.4. Embodying the desert

5.3.3 has shown how the desert is simultaneously constructed as dangerous and experienced as caring. The following section turns to how such an environment is not only represented and felt, but also physically and cognitively known through embodied engagement with the landscape.

Scene 11. In the footsteps of ancestors

> *Ahmad and I led the sheep through low bushes toward the opposite side of the valley, now green and dotted with white and yellow flowers. He directed the herd with loud "arrrrt" calls and clapping.*

[36] "Anthropocentrism is defined as thinking that considers humanity's existence as central and the most important fact of the universe (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024, in Ahmetović, 2024, p. 9). "Ecocentrism emerges as a philosophy that values all life, not only those aspects that are useful to humans" ("Dictionary.com | Meanings & Definitions of English Words" 2021, ibid.)

On the way, I collected firewood, intent on making a fire after failing to do so last night. Ahmad pulled dry, golden branches from a shrub: "Use this. Burns like gas."

We let the sheep graze and climbed a nearby slope to sit on a stone. Ahmad walked up in slippers without difficulty.

He then pointed toward the rock face behind us, where a small manmade cavity was visible. It functioned as a natural refrigerator: the mountain, he explained, stays cold in summer and warm in winter. Nearby were larger versions, some with windows, and a few meters further, stone inscriptions that were difficult to notice if not looked at directly.

Slippers were the most common footwear among Bedouins, reflecting not only climate conditions but also a mode of movement shaped by frequent transitions between indoor and outdoor spaces. This everyday mobility suggests a form of embodied familiarity with the terrain gradually acquired through continuous exposure.

Similarly, caves and inscriptions were not immediately visible to an outsider, nor are they typically marked as tourist attractions. As discussed in 5.3.1., such places become legible only through guided attention, indicating a form of environmental knowledge embedded in situated perception. This perceptual familiarity extends beyond movement and observation to practices of extraction and ecological use.

Scene 12. Hunting gold, tasting herbs

I began breathing on my mouth as we paced along the side of the mountain, following the sheep. J told me to always breathe through nose, with closed mouth, to not inhale the dry air.

They showed me leaves and flowers I can eat. Some of it tasted acidic, like green lemon, other bitter like grass. Then they pointed to holes dug out by moles and told me they eat them and that their meat is good.

J was a passionate hobbyist in gold hunting. We found a small round hole the size of a fist in one of the red boulders close to my tent. It was man made, and itself had two small holes on its sides. J poured water in, and the way water went was the way to the possible gold source, which in this case was up the steep hill above my tent.

> *We later ate lunch—meatballs in yoghurt sauce with flat bread. After finishing, M emptied the leftovers into the desert. "It is good, for the desert," J said.*

As Tarawneh (2009, p. 423) notes, the Bedouin of Wadi Rum "have vast knowledge of the desert plants and what they can be used for." These practices—tracking, foraging, interpreting rock formations—require a trained attentiveness to the environment. In Wadi Rum, the boundary between built and natural environments is thin, often marked only by minimal human interventions that rework the terrain[37]. The markings in soil and stone are visually integrated into the landscape and often become meaningful only through interpretation.

Marinaki (2021) argues it is precisely these survival skills and perceptive abilities, "constructed of lived experience and needs," that contribute to the "authenticity of being Bedouin", and which would be "meaningless in other contexts."

Yet, while survival is not the prevailing context in which these practices unfold, meaning is nevertheless obtained. Traditional skills link contemporary movement through the desert with longer histories of ancestral knowledge and old habitats. While modern infrastructure in nearby settlements reduces dependence of survival on such skills, forms of ecological familiarity are occasionally reactivated in everyday or leisure contexts. In this way, Bedouin camps and the surrounding desert environment create spaces where cultural identity associated with nomadic practices is not only preserved but also enacted through recreation, everyday practice, and sensory engagement with the landscape.

5.3.5 Mobility and Identity

The previous subchapter discussed how traditionally nomadic practices continue to be maintained outside village domains, often through recreation, leisure, and temporary dwelling in the desert. In this way, land remains closely tied to Bedouin

[37] See Appendix A Selected photographs Figure 4 and Figure 5

cultural identity, a relationship emphasized both in academic literature and in tourism and governmental representations (e.g. 5.3.2. (In)hospitality of the desert).

The designation of Wadi Rum as a protected area inevitably carried significant implications for the relationship between land and its inhabitants. In exploring these consequences, Strachan (2012, p. 110) cites one interlocutor complaining about the newly employed rangers responsible for enforcing environmental regulations: “They (rangers) are frightening the people so much. They police them more than what is normal and they try to check the cars and if you pull up little wood for you from the desert you know they try to stop it. How can I make you my coffee or my tea?...the rangers are pushing so much...Where you come from? Where you come? What you doing? Why you are here? What are you doing?”

The frustration expressed here, particularly regarding the inability to collect wood or preparation of tea and coffee, illustrates how deeply unrestricted land use is embedded within everyday cultural practice. At the same time, Tarawneh (2009) notes that local Bedouins are positioned between the economic importance of tourism and environmental protection on one side, and the restrictions these developments impose on grazing activities and spatial mobility on the other.

Marinaki (2021) similarly notes the paradoxical relationship of the Bedouin and the Jordanian state. While heavily manning the army and police, this position simultaneously gives them confidence to resist state authorities regarding environmental regulation, tourism development, and land access. As one interlocutor summarized: “If anything happens, they will call us for help anyway.”

Scene 13. Through the fence

We found the sheep roaming the valley in the fenced area that they passed by climbing the rocks around the fence, and us through a man-made hole in it. This hole was easily opened or closed and tied with metal strings and was done so several times a day usually.

We sat on a cliff next to the ancient caves, overlooking the valley and the sheep grazing in it.
"There is a car coming" Ahmad said.
Two Toyota jeeps slowly rolled in between bushes and blasted Arab music loudly. It was our crew. They parked in the shade of a tall, vertical mountain. When we got down to them, they had already made a fire and put the teapot on it. A few were posing in elegant robes and taking photographs.

In her extensive study of tourism development in Wadi Rum, Strachan (2012) examines the closure of Wadi Rumman, the valley selected in 2006 as an enclosure for the reintroduction of the Arabian oryx. The decision was presented to Sheikh Ali of the Al-Suwailhiyin family, who approved it after weighing the anticipated environmental and economic benefits. Nevertheless, Strachan argues that the enclosure produced consequences extending beyond material displacement, including emotional and cultural disruptions tied to the loss of ancestral land and established lifeways.

After reading Strachan's account, I contacted Ahmad for further context. Sheikh Ali was Ahmad's grandfather, and the events described in the thesis unfolded during Ahmad's childhood. When I mentioned that I had not realized the valley was officially closed due to the oryx enclosure, Ahmad simply replied:

"Nothing is closed for us"

As Rakic and Chambers (2012) write, when humans invest meaning in a portion of space and become attached to it in some way, it becomes a place. The official enclosure of Wadi Rumman might have only intensified its significance for Al-Suwailhiyin family. The continued movement through the fenced landscape, alongside everyday practices such as driving, herding, tea preparation, and gathering in the valley, can be understood as forms of embodied cultural continuity despite administrative restrictions. Ahmad's assertive statement demonstrates pride

in freedom of movement and independence as fundamental determinants of the Bedouin identity.

6. Discussion

6.1. The habitus of the Bedouin

Previous analysis has revealed how friction and complexities between representations and lived experience of Wadi Rum arise over multiple contexts and through different cultural phenomena under study.

Cultural values of hospitality, generosity, and care for the guest, heavily featured in tourism imaginaries and other systems of representation, emerged as embodied practices both within and beyond strictly tourist settings. These values were directed not only toward visitors but also toward family members and other locals. Similarly, patterns of communal gathering appeared across different families of Wadi Rum, tourist campsites, non-tourist tents, and village settings. Such practices included sharing and serving of food and beverages, greetings, and dynamic social and movement patterns.

These recurring patterns can be understood as essential expressions of the Bedouin habitus, which interacts with contemporary social and economic contexts and is thus "produced by the material conditions of existence in a society" (see 3.1.). **The significance of these practices lies in their persistence across different settings.** Whether in a family tent, a tourist camp, or the village, similar social expectations and practices remained recognizable.

A growing body of literature (see 2.5.) understands Bedouin cultural identity as a discourse shaped through reciprocal interactions between signs, meanings, and representations. Yet this does not diminish the community's capacity for self-representation and active identity construction. Through storytelling and everyday

discussion (see 5.1.4.), creative individuals and figures of authority navigate the complex position of Bedouin identity within the contemporary world while simultaneously reinforcing communal cohesion. The discourse of cultural identity therefore operates not only on a macro level through state narratives, tourism representations, and internal representations, but also through everyday interactions among individuals and families. **Daily embodied practices are thus closely intertwined with broader systems of meaning and representation.**[38]

Knowledge among interlocutors was frequently expressed through practical experience, social interaction, and embodied engagement with everyday life rather than through abstract reflection. Such observations align with an understanding of humans as social and sentient beings who dwell within worlds of shared meanings, habits, and practices that precede the individual (see 4.1.).

The example of gender segregation further illustrates efforts to preserve traditional social structures and customs. At the same time, tourism representations frequently involve effort to align images of Bedouin culture with contemporary lifestyles and values by presenting Bedouin lifeways as organically modern. This produces a distinction between cultural realities that are accessible to visitors and those that remain largely beyond their reach. **The encounter between visitors and locals can therefore be understood as the intersection of diverging habituses informed by previously encountered representations.**

The presence of modern technologies introduces an additional complexity. Tourism representations often portray life in Wadi Rum as timeless, a portrayal that requires visitors to overlook the presence of jeeps, smartphones, mobile signal, and other contemporary infrastructures. Everyday life, however, reveals a more complex reality in which modern and traditional practices coexist and frequently overlap.

[38]Performance turn "recognizes that these everyday performances take place within wider societal discourses." (Haldrup, 2010, p. 5) – see 3.2.

Contrasting temporalities and spatial contexts exist side by side, often entering into one another in the form of technological innovations on one side, and the continuation of older customs on the other. **These interactions occur not only across different settings in proximity but also within the same family and even within the same social encounter.** Modernity and tradition, tourism and everyday life, therefore, emerge not as separate spheres but as overlapping realities through which the Bedouin habitus continues to be expressed and embodied.

6.2. Performativity of Wadi Rum

Chapter 5.2 examined how cultural commodification appears through governmental and tourism initiatives that seek to preserve and present Bedouin life "as it once was," reflecting broader patterns identified in the literature on community-based governmental initiatives. Such efforts are sustained by tourists' desire for extra-authenticity, simulation of idealized lifeways and stimulation. The representation of culture as a particular temporality—exemplified by attractions such as the *Journey Through 1916* train ride—depends on the active participation and engagement with the imaginative process of both hosts and visitors (see 3.2.) In this sense, authenticity emerges not solely from what is presented, but also from how it is experienced and interpreted. Through this common engagement, place is constructed, co-produced, and meaning is given to the performance.

This co-production of meaning extends beyond staged encounters. Social media platforms such as Instagram increasingly shape how Wadi Rum is imagined before, during, and after travel. Images and videos circulate across different temporal, social, and spatial contexts, allowing place to be experienced remotely and repeatedly. The content produced by tourists, local individuals, and campsites frequently emphasizes visually spectacular landscapes, adventure, and

romanticized desert imagery, reflecting patterns identified by Bott and other scholars examining contemporary reproductions of Orientalist motifs (see 2.4.).

The analysis also highlighted how tourism developments transform both landscape and cultural values into economic assets. The desert becomes a source of aesthetic value and competitive advantage, while authenticity itself acquires economic significance as something that can attract visitors and distinguish experiences. Yet reducing authenticity to a marketable resource alone would overlook its broader cultural importance. Conversations with members of three different families revealed strong attitudes regarding what constitutes authentic Bedouin culture and an fervent intention to create an authentic experience of Wadi Rum. **These discussions suggest that authenticity functions not only as a tourism commodity but also exists on a more integrated level as a cultural value closely connected to identity, heritage, and pride.**

Such perspectives recall Layne's observation that "The Bedouins of the Jordan Valley define themselves in an environment full of others' definitions and evaluating commentaries and the Bedouins' views are entangled with these discourses" (1989). Wadi Rum similarly exists within a dense field of external representations generated by tourism marketing, state narratives, media portrayals, and visitor expectations. In a sea of external representations, through offering and presenting their vision of an authentic experience to the visitor, individuals and families seek to carry, represent and honour the meaning of being Bedouin and inhabiting Wadi Rum.

6.3. Space, meaning, and place attachment

Chapter 5.3. Desert illustrated how, through the process of sacralization, localities around which dominant systems of sightseeing are built acquire generalized meanings and motifs of desert life that guide tourist attention and movement.

Space becomes embedded with physical markings of meaning, such as jeep tracks, which simultaneously facilitate mobility and indicate established routes of experience.

Much like attempts to present a particular temporal dimension as cultural identity, **dominant tourism initiatives create curated mobility through which cultural commodification extends to patterns of movement.** These systems are challenged by alternative pathways, both organized and independent, which intersect, cross, and occasionally diverge from dominant routes.

This process closely aligns with the psychogeographical concept of "dérive" – "to wander in a landscape so as to re-discover it" (Ferrere, 2020, p. 45)**. Drifting thus becomes a way of establishing new relationships with the landscape and partially resisting the commodification of space through prescribed routes and experiences.**

While dominant representations can limit understandings of spatial freedom, movement through Wadi Rum is characterized by a high degree of openness and experiential possibility. At the same time, mobility carries a social dimension grounded in communal knowledge and responsibility. Freedom of movement is therefore not experienced as complete independence, but as participation in a landscape structured by both social relations and local understandings.

Representations of Bedouin hospitality frequently connect the cultural value to the harshness of the desert environment. Yet my own experience suggested the opposite dynamic: precisely because of local hospitality, as well as increased mobility afforded by contemporary transportation and tourism infrastructure, the desert was experienced primarily as a space of care and safety rather than danger.

Similarly to the experience of Bedouin culture itself, perceptions of the desert are strongly shaped by prior assumptions, expectations, and cultural backgrounds.

Previously encountered representations influence subsequent experiences, illustrating how tourism imaginaries contribute to the formation of temporary interpretive frameworks through which landscapes are understood.

The analysis also highlighted **how the desert environment and traditional Bedouin camps serve as a zone of recreation through which traditional lifeways are preserved and embodied.**

Although no longer essential for survival, activities such as herding, gathering, tracking, and other forms of ecological engagement remain meaningful as expressions of cultural identity and continuity. Likewise, informal and experiential knowledge of the terrain persists despite the reduced practical necessity of such traditionally survival skills.

As Giuliani (2003) suggests, "people get involved in an interaction process with places and, during this process, they develop a variety of attachment strength levels towards these places. In many cases, they are not aware of the emotional bonds with places till the place attachment is threatened."

The relationship between Bedouin culture and the desert emerges both as a recurring representational theme and as a lived social reality. With the involvement of governmental bodies and environmental protection efforts, space becomes a place of contest, and its meaning is further strengthened. Enclosed ancestral land acquires symbolic meaning, while repeated acts of re-entry and the continuation of everyday practices such as herding, gathering, and preparing tea serve to reaffirm connections to place.

As outlined by Cooper & Kruglikova, (2022, p. 2), the human-environment relationship is dialectic; "physical and human spaces converge through exchanges that shape and reshape landscape morphology". This reciprocal relationship between landscape and representation of Wadi Rum is exemplified by the Seven

Pillars of Wisdom. The visually distinctive mountain reportedly inspired the name of T.E. Lawrence's most famous literary work (Rum, 2026). The site, which sits in front of the Visitor centre, is now in turn named after the book. **Space thus generates meaning, and representation subsequently returns meaning to space.**

6.4. Discussion synthesis and research question

How are Bedouin cultural practices and meanings of place in Wadi Rum shaped through their relationship with tourism developments and tourism representations?

Firstly, the relationship of lived experience, tourism developments and representations is reciprocal. This is visible in the construction of cultural identity, the meaning attributed to landscape, the practice of cultural values and social customs.

Secondly, the commodification of Bedouin culture operates across multiple dimensions, including cultural values (hospitality), aesthetics (landscape appeal), authenticity (staged performances), and mobility (curated movement through space). Yet, cultural practices, values and landscape continue to exist as meaningful social realities outside of cultural commodification. These are enacted across different contexts and often intersect with tourist settings.

This study demonstrates that many Bedouin cultural practices persist as meaningful forms of everyday life beyond their touristic value. Rather than existing merely as performances for visitors, practices such as hospitality, desert mobility, ecological knowledge and attachment to place continue to be actively embodied across both touristic and non-touristic contexts.

Embodied engagement with the desert generates personal and communal meanings and forms of place attachment that exceed representational frameworks. Desert

environments and Bedouin camps remain particularly important settings for the enactment and preservation of cultural identity through the recreation of traditional lifeways. Therefore, tourism representations do not overwrite lived practice. Instead, they coexist with, draw from, and are partially grounded in enduring embodied lifeways.

Finally, the findings of this study related to authenticity and cultural identity reveal that representations can also function as a form of cultural expression through which individuals and communities articulate their understanding of authentic Bedouin culture. In some instances, this involves a deliberate distancing from or reworking of dominant tourism imaginaries perceived as simplified or inauthentic. In this way, dominant narratives, commodified images and experiences serve as differentiation upon which an alternative representation of cultural identity is built.

7. Conclusion

This thesis examined the relationship between lived experiences and touristic representations of Bedouin culture in Wadi Rum. This was done through a phenomenological and ethnographic approach attentive to embodied experience, tourism narratives, and place attachment. By combining narrative ethnography and netnographic material with insights from multi-sensory engagement, it sought to explore how cultural identity and place are produced and sustained through everyday practices, representations, and interactions with the desert landscape.

Methodologically, this thesis contributes to the growing body of innovative, experimental approaches to qualitative research of tourism phenomena which require a language "that speaks to the emotional life of tourism in terms that do not reduce it to motivational factors." (Crang, 2014, p. 74). Informed by the field of psychogeography, it considered spatial environment as an essential factor deeply intertwined with lived culture, its representations and tourist encounters.

Limitations which were addressed in methodology chapter are to be stressed again; the findings of this thesis are based on my own experience, a particular time period, and individual opinions, and therefore are not representative of objective truth.

Bedouin lifeways are a cultural phenomenon which continues independently despite, and at other times aligned with tourism narratives, modern occurrences, political frames and cultural commodification. The recurring persistence of many Bedouin practices and values, despite rapid social, technological, and economic change, emerged as one of the main revelations of my fieldwork.

This continuity cannot be fully grasped and explained through religious rules, social customs, tourism performances, or simple survival logic. It is my belief that cultural practices remain meaningful precisely because they continue to be actively embodied and practiced regardless of their present-day non-essentiality, towards guests - travellers and locals alike.

At the same time, it is evident that broader socio-economic, environmental and technological changes, including increased digital usage and transportational mobility, influence cultural lifeways. Addressing the apparent disappearance of nomadism once considered central to Bedouin life, Browning (2013) suggests that rather than asking "Where have the Bedouin gone?", the more useful question is "Where are the Bedouin going?"

Future research could further examine how contemporary socio-economic and technological changes are reshaping Bedouin cultural practices in Wadi Rum, particularly through long-term engagement with physical and digital fieldworks. Such studies could explore how pastoralism, oral storytelling, and forms of embodied environmental knowledge are being reconfigured within shifting generational dynamics, digital expressions, and the growth of tourism as the

dominant industry. What does this change mean for the Bedouin identity of future generations? Will tourism become a “traditional” practice over time? Will social media performances become embedded cultural encounters?

In one of our last conversations, discussing tourism development, I asked Ahmad what the first step would be if he were in charge of tourism industry in Wadi Rum. Perhaps not understanding my question of governance entirely, he gave a rather symbolic answer that truly embodies the persisting pragmaticism of the Bedouin: “first thing? Tea, coffee.”

The recurrence of tourism narratives. their critiques and alternatives, and efforts to grasp what it means to be a Bedouin of Wadi Rum indicate that the culture and place remain a global phenomenon. In a landscape recognized by cinematography, academia, tourism industry and conservational institutions, the Bedouin remain firm in their pragmaticism and conviction that the guest is priority.

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On the use of GAI

In the preliminary stages of the project, GAI tool ChatGPT was used to support the creation of an outline of the thesis, based on detailed prompts of relevant literature findings, visual frame, argumentative logic, and followed by careful revision and editing of the output.

During fieldwork, ChatGPT served primarily as an enhanced search engine and supplementary tool for translation and language support, particularly in relation to Arabic–English transliteration and communication assistance. Selected examples of translated material are included in the appendices.

In planning of the writing process, the tool provided organisational support in form of a breakdown of the process into stages and a clear timeline.

During the writing process, the tool was used for feedback and advice on structure, content-relevance and preservation of cohesion between various blocks of the thesis. Additionally, it provided support for clarifying conceptual overlaps in literature, and assisting with language refinement, particularly in relation to coherence, redundancy, and transitions between sections. All text re-written and revised through AI assistance was critically assessed and edited by the author.

Appendices

Appendix A

Fieldwork photograph gallery

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1CkZR-Gicj1mAySqm5Tx0ESBrA3xUD0-C?usp=sharing

Fieldwork video records

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1y5dPRCmkW0FpEYgoOnM6gGkEnqE4Elm2?usp=sharing

Fieldwork audio records

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1oynKiYsLps6mw6HMbIpfrp2HDpe2G1xU?usp=sharing

Selected photographs

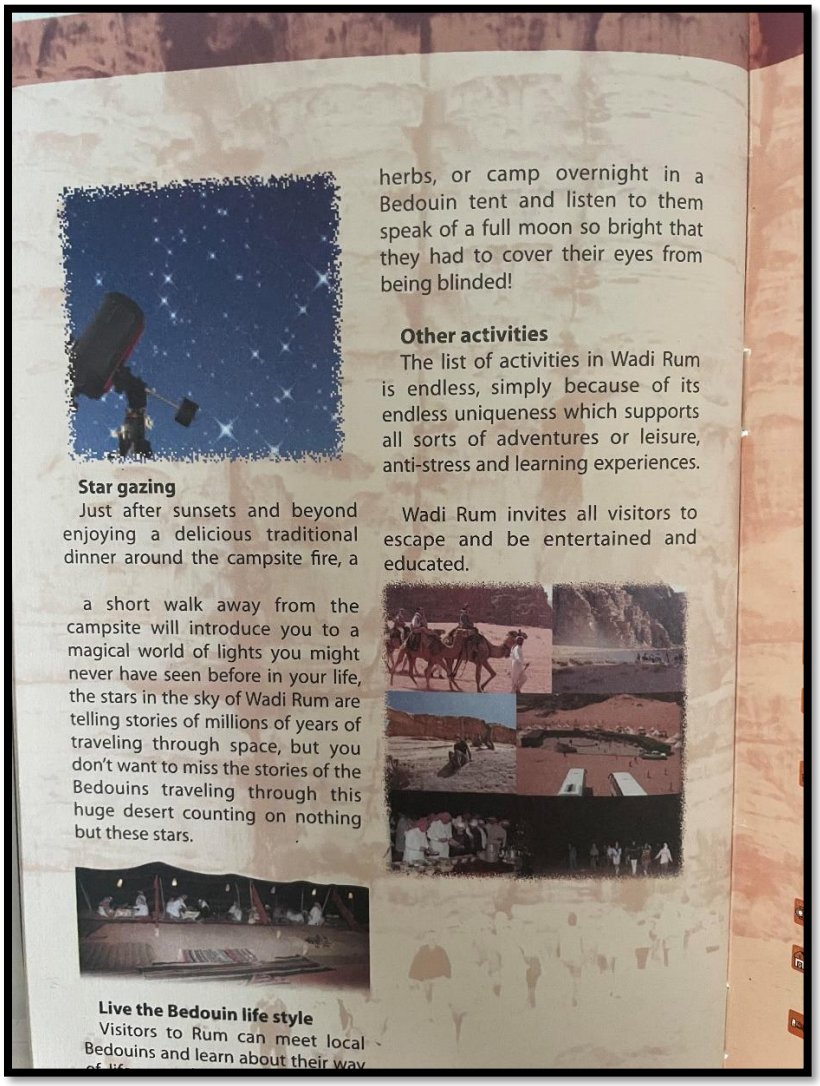


Figure 1. Immerse Yourself Wadi Rum Destination Guide. Author's gallery

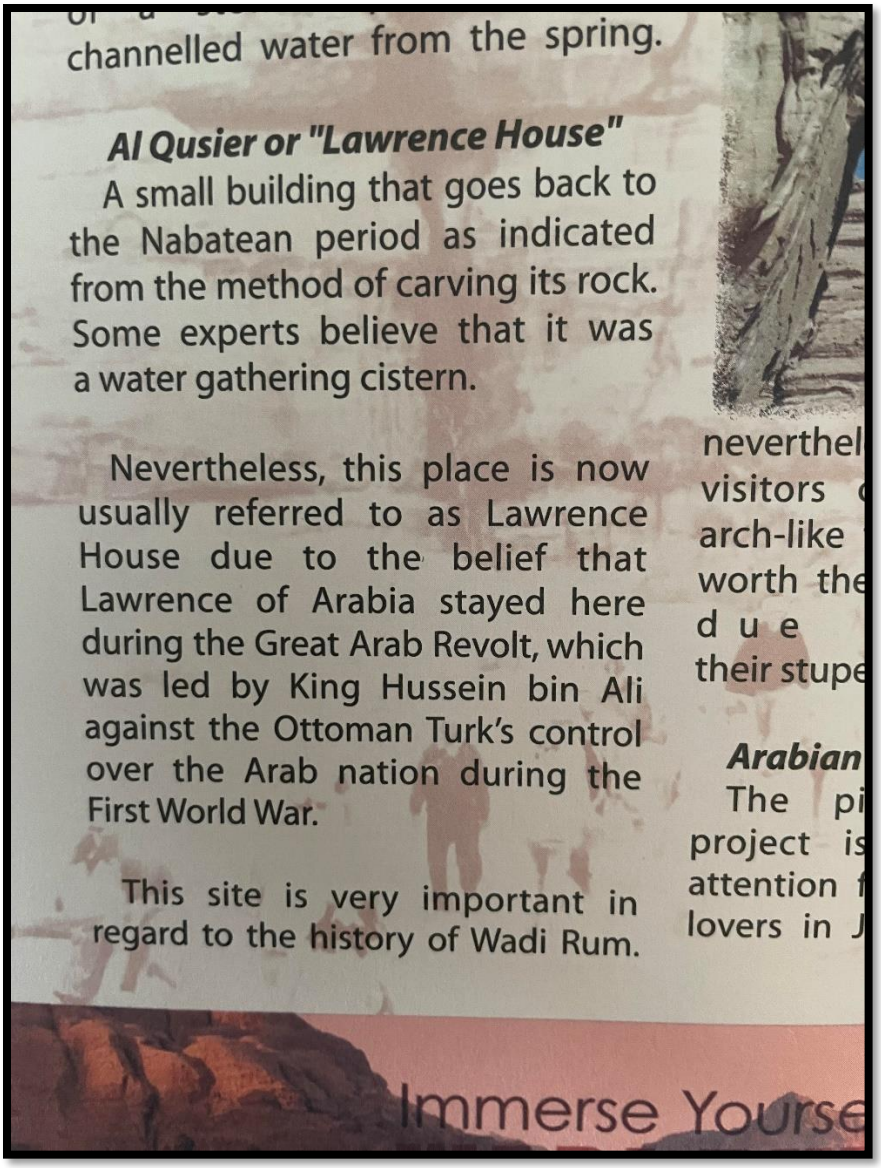


Figure 2. Immerse Yourself Wadi Rum Destination Guide. Author's gallery

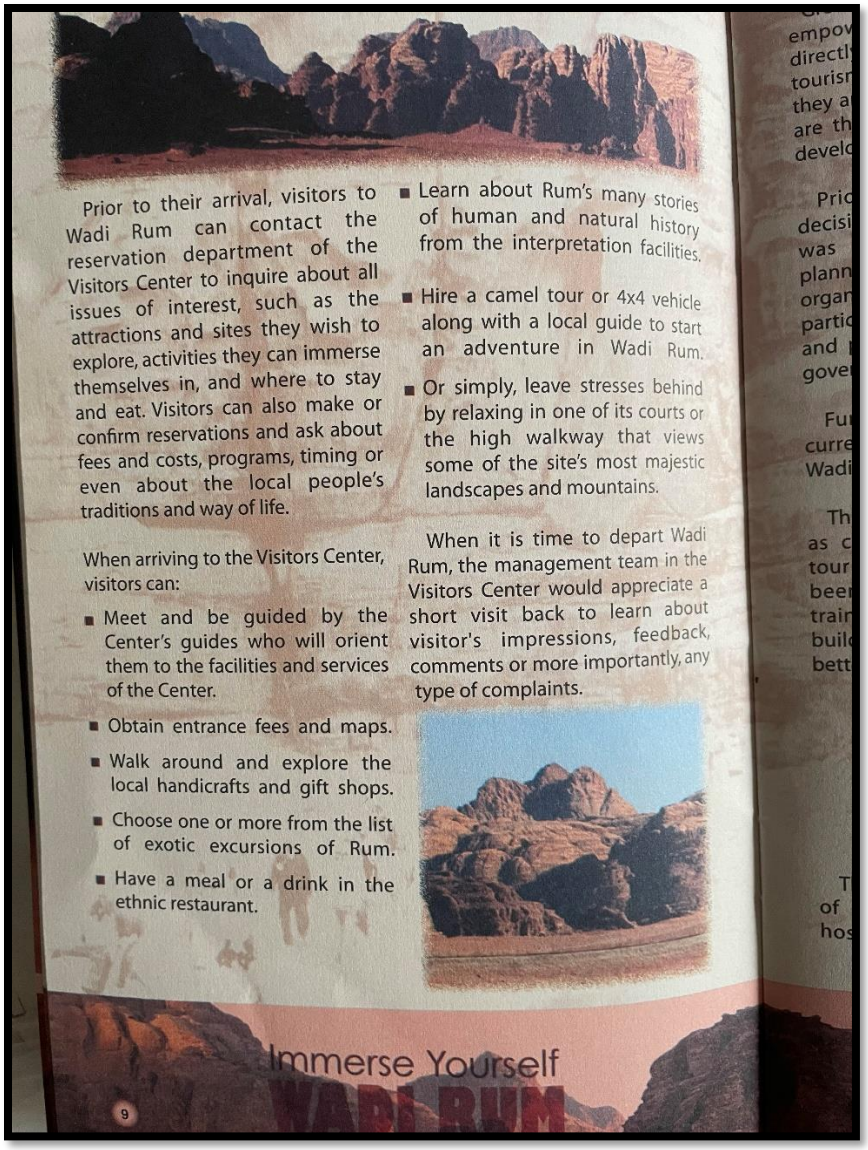


Figure 3. Immerse Yourself Wadi Rum Destination Guide. Author's gallery

Figure 4. The way to the Little Bridge. Author’s gallery

Figure 5. Wadi Rumman cave house. Author’s gallery

Figure 6. Salihiyah. Ahnad's family home tent. Prior to Eid al Fitr gathering. Author's gallery

Figure 7. Wadi Rumman gathering and meal preparation. Author's gallery

Figure 8. Wadi Rumman, Ahmad’s tent. Author’s gallery

Figure 9. Wadi Rum Journey through 1916 train ride. Author's gallery

Figure 10. Luxury campsite viewpoint. Author’s gallery

Figure 11. The Seven Pillars of Wisdom vista from Visitor centre. Author's gallery

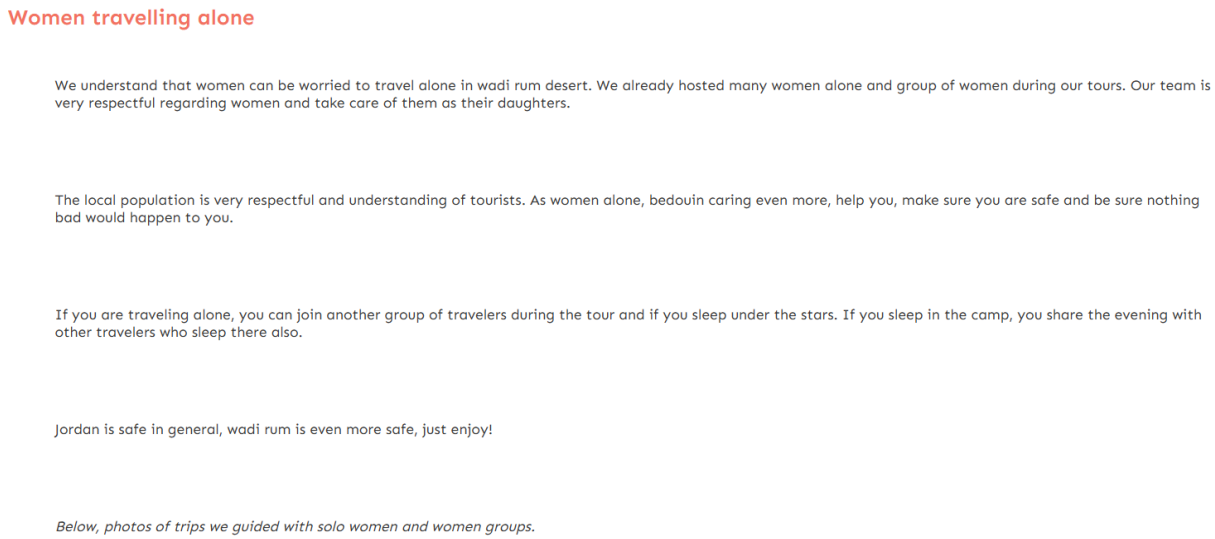
Appendix B

Digital material video sample

1. (TopDJMagDC, 2026)
https://www.youtube.com/shorts/IltigZywEPE (accessed 13th May)
2. (Hoek, Silent Hiking 6 days in Wadi Rum Desert - Jordan, 2023)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gGjypazdj9E (accessed (14th March)

Digital material screenshots

Figure 1 – highlighted story Wadi Rum Bedouin camp (accessed 14th May, 2026)
Source:https://www.instagram.com/wadirumbedouincamp?utm_source=ig_web_button_share_sheet&igsh=ZDNlZDc0MzIxNw==



Women travelling alone

We understand that women can be worried to travel alone in wadi rum desert. We already hosted many women alone and group of women during our tours. Our team is very respectful regarding women and take care of them as their daughters.

The local population is very respectful and understanding of tourists. As women alone, bedouin caring even more, help you, make sure you are safe and be sure nothing bad would happen to you.

If you are traveling alone, you can join another group of travelers during the tour and if you sleep under the stars. If you sleep in the camp, you share the evening with other travelers who sleep there also.

Jordan is safe in general, wadi rum is even more safe, just enjoy!

Below, photos of trips we guided with solo women and women groups.

Figure 2 – Wadi Rum Stillness campsite (accessed 12th May, 2026)
Source: https://www.wadirumstillness.com/women-travelling-alone/

Figure 3 – Reddit discussion thread (accessed 15th May)
Source:https://www.reddit.com/r/travel/comments/1557h8w/wadi_rum_as_a_solo_female/

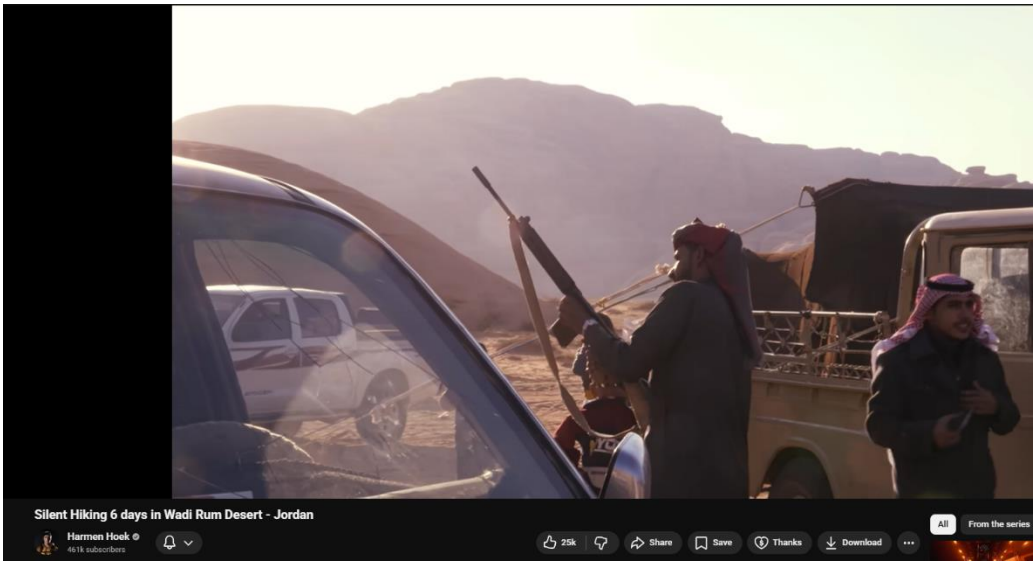


Figure 4 – Harmen Hoek Silen Hiking 6 days in Wadi Rum Desert (accessed 14th March)
Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gGjypazdj9E&t=1115s

Figure 5 – Khazali Mountain campsite (accessed 16th May)
Source: https://www.instagram.com/khazalimountain/

Figure 6 – Wadi Rum Bedouin Camp (accessed 16th May)
Source: https://www.instagram.com/wadirumbedouincamp/

Figure 7 – Shahrazhad luxury campsite Instagram account re-post (accessed 18th May)
Source: https://www.instagram.com/shahrazadluxury/

Figure 8 – Shahrazhad luxury campsite Instagram account (accessed 18th May)
Source: https://www.instagram.com/shahrazadluxury/

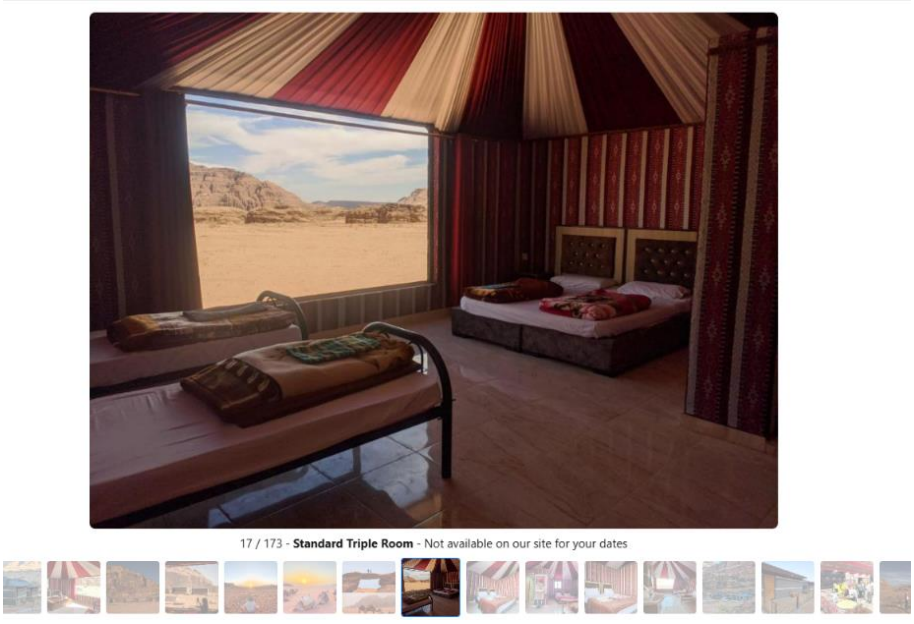


Figure 9 - an example from K's campsite listing on booking.com (accessed 17th May)
Source: https://shorturl.at/2Htc5

Figure 10 – an excerpt of a google review from Khalid's campsite (accessed 17th May)
Source: Bedouin Star Trail Google Maps

Appendix C

Maps

Figure 1 – Google maps screenshot of visited localities and hiking trajectory.

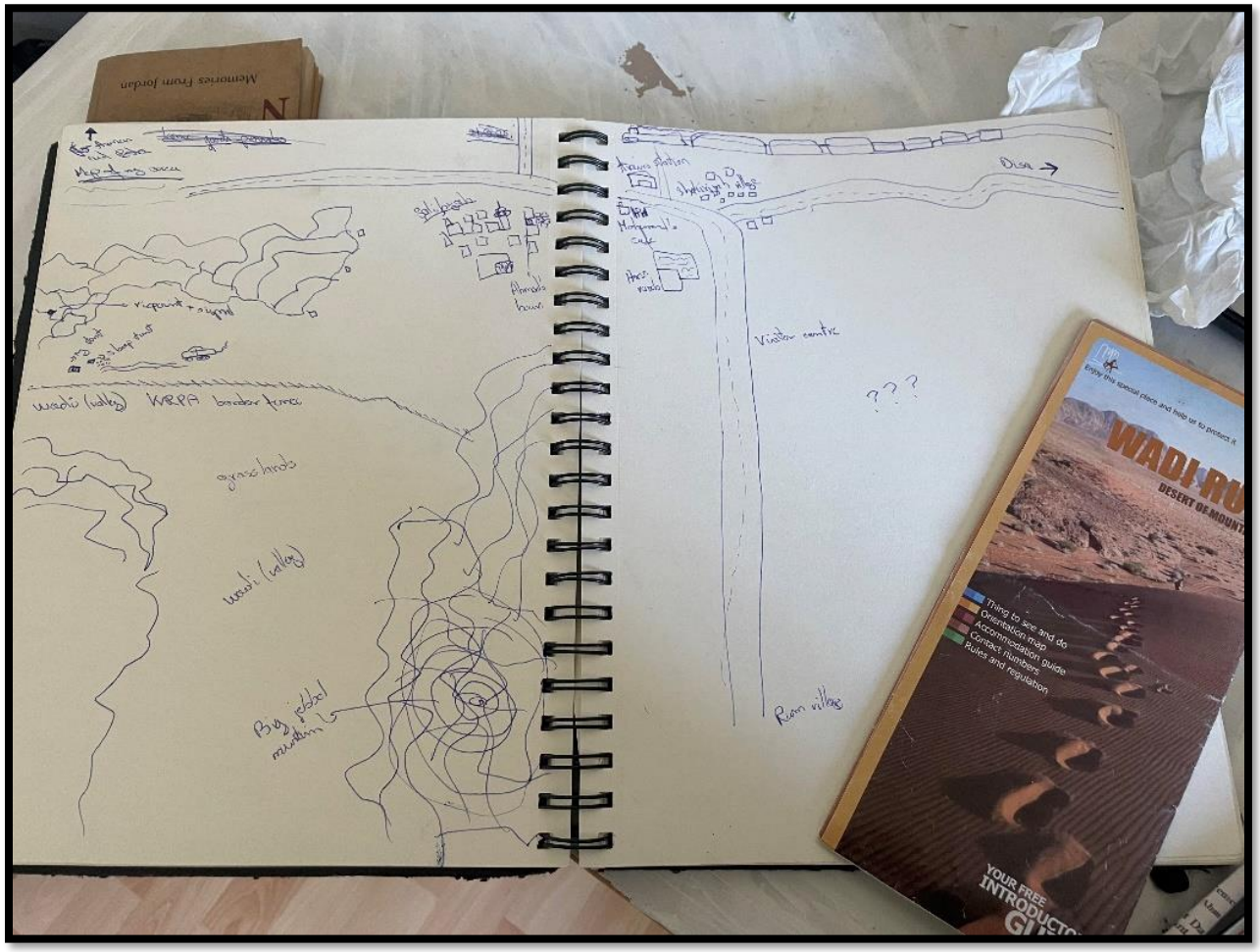


Figure 2 – journal mapping of Wadi Rum

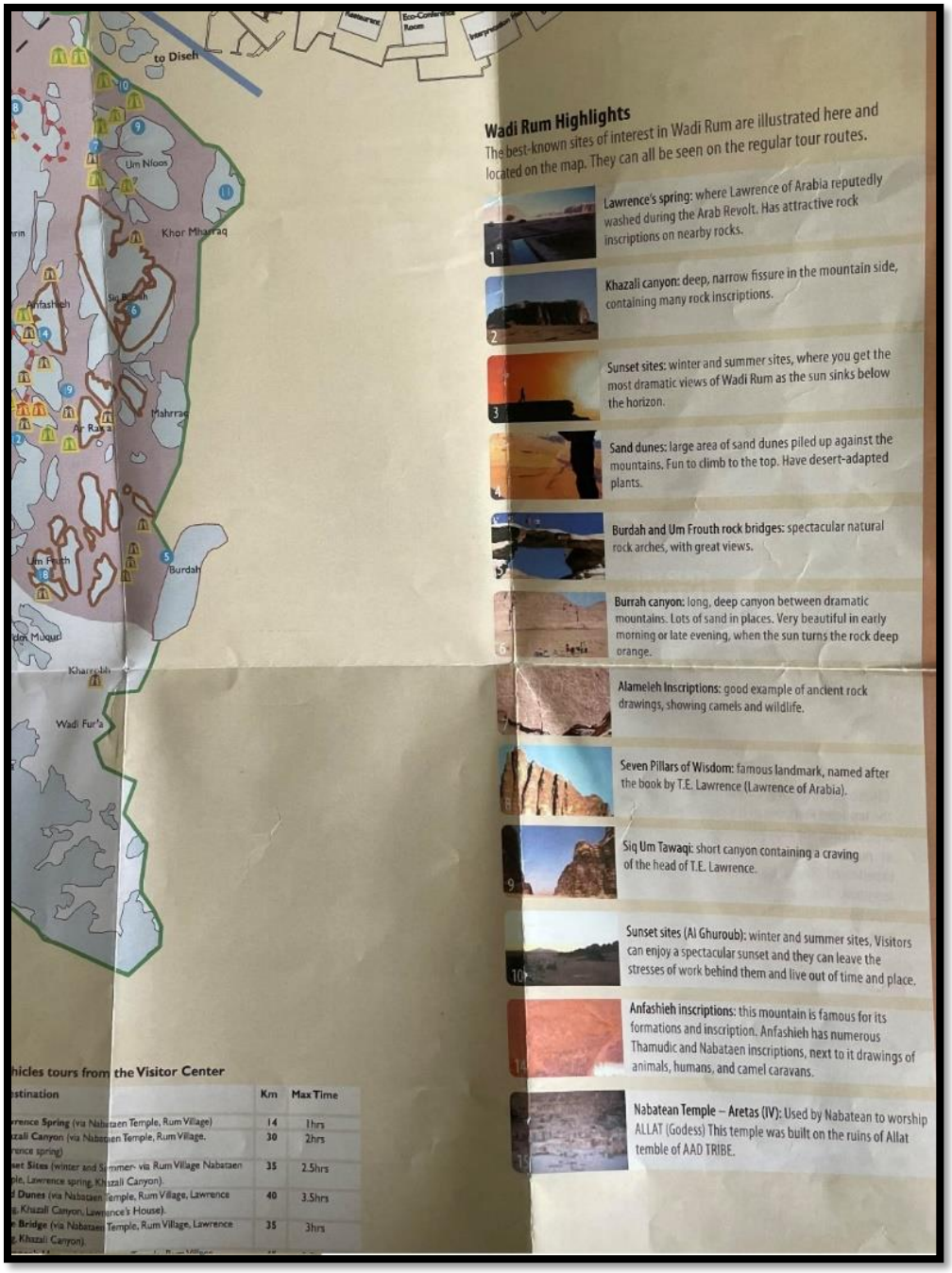


Figure 3 - Official map obtained from the visitor centre reception. Note the brief descriptions of places of interest.

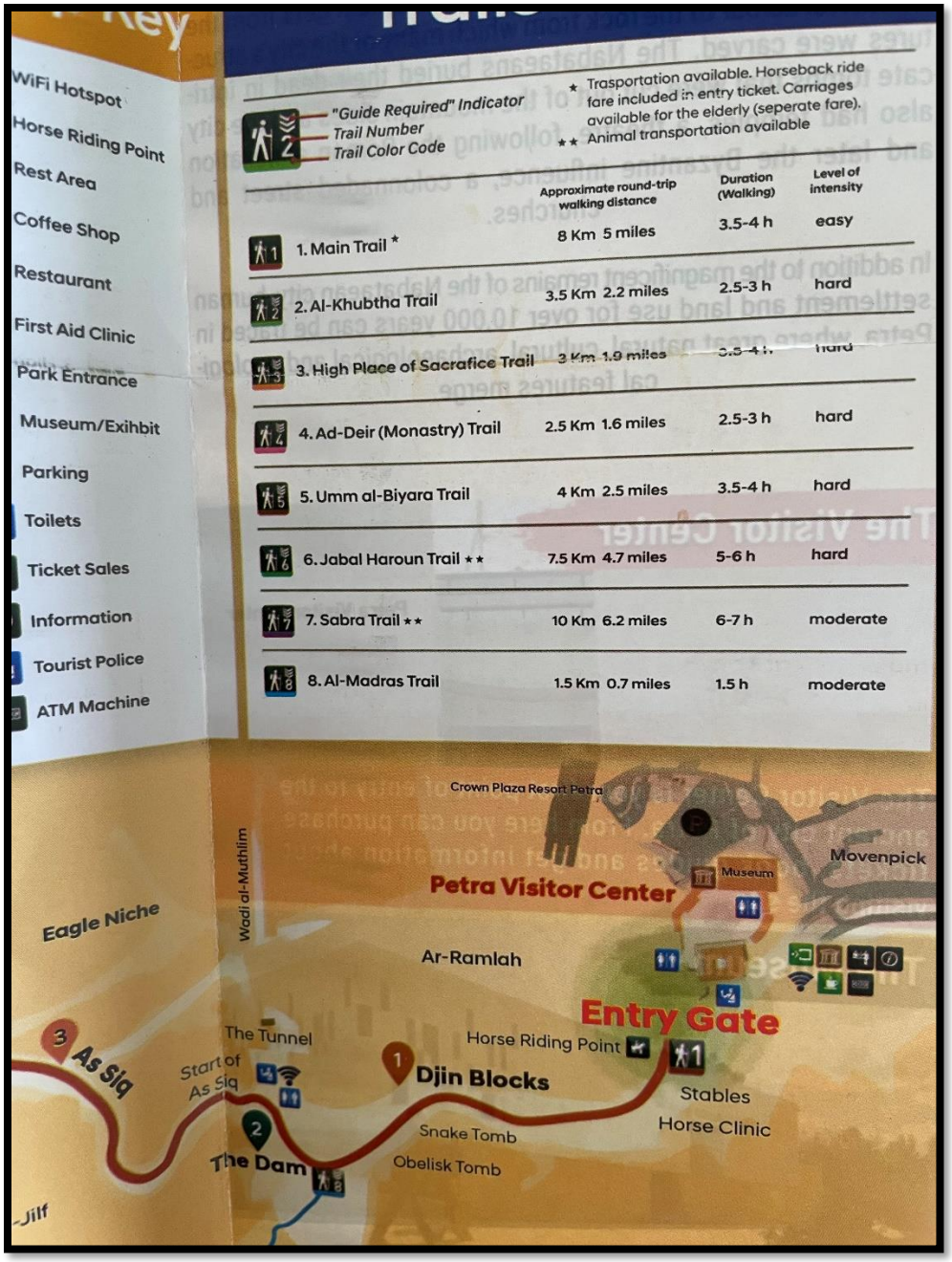


Figure 4 – Official map obtained from the visitor centre of Petra. Note the trail guide required indicators for all but trail number 1.

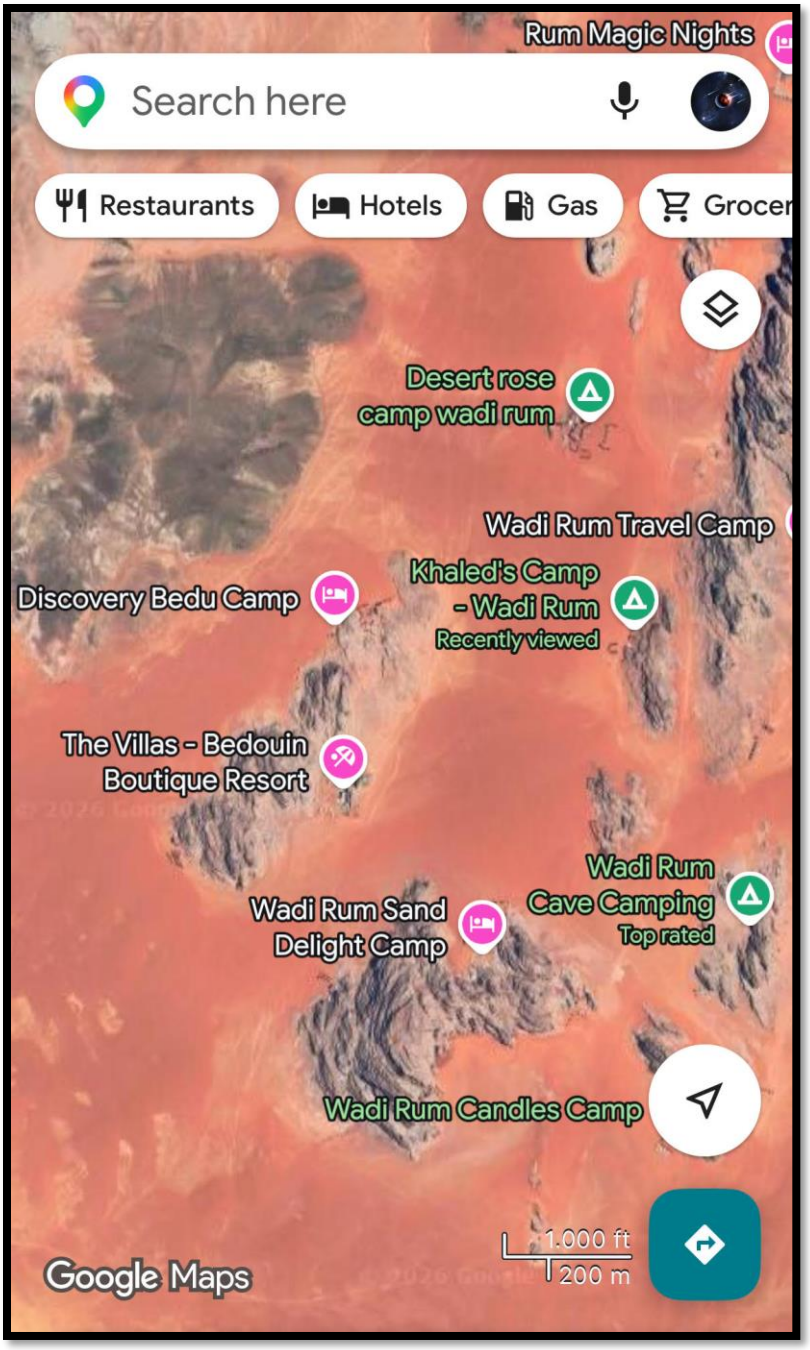


Figure 5 – Google Maps screenshot (accessed 26th May)

Appendix D

Conversation fieldnotes sample

Ahmad Al-Suwailhiyin - host

I talked with Ahmad quite a bit on our last day. I made a formal recording and asked him a general question what Bedouin culture for him is. It was interesting that he himself told me that the question was too general; "you would need to write a book about it."

I asked him why the Zalabieh Bedouins were much more active in tourism than the Huwaitat. He explained that the areas inhabited by the Huwaitat are designated primarily for film productions, while the Zalabieh areas are designated for tourism. However, Saudi Arabia has recently opened its landscapes to Hollywood and invited large film projects, so that industry is no longer as strong as it once was.

He also explained that the Zalabieh and Zawaideh are part of the larger Enezeh family, which arrived after the Huwaitat from Saudi Arabia.

He also spoke about how the world has a distorted view of Islam. His religion, he said, teaches him not to kill anyone. He added that the Qur'an specifically advises people during times of conflict to stay home and avoid becoming involved.

We then talked about his plans for the camp. He showed me photographs of ideas for a new toilet, built from local natural materials while still appearing modern and aesthetically appealing.

He also showed me plans for placing a king-size bed in the middle of the desert. The idea was visually appealing, although I saw several practical inconveniences.

I told him that in the future he should ensure that guests are not disturbed by large groups of his friends late at night. I said that I personally did not mind, but some tourists might want more peace and privacy. He replied: "Of course. Business is business."

Later, Ahmad showed me his old Mercedes in the desert. He loved that car, although I was not convinced it would survive long in such an environment. As he scrolled through photographs on his phone, he stopped at a picture of an old man riding a donkey while carrying an AK-47, smoking a cigarette, and displaying a set of rotten teeth.

"My grandfather," Ahmad said.

I looked at him in disbelief. He burst out laughing, and so did I. His grandfather was a highly respected man whose photographs with the King of Jordan hung on the wall behind us.

Ahmad then repeated a phrase another Bedouin had used with me the previous day after I gave him my hiking pole: “Two ass, one dress,” a local expression indicating close friendship.

I asked Ahmad whether I could use his real name in my thesis. He said yes, because he stands behind his word and does not change his story depending on who he is speaking to.
As we said goodbye, I asked him to greet everyone on my behalf. He replied that everyone in the village thought I was a good man. I told him that I would return to visit again before leaving Wadi Rum.

Mg, 24 – coworker at a luxury campsite

I asked Mg why he studied tourism. He replied that it was the easiest degree and that what mattered most to him was the experience.
Mg wants to work and eventually become his own boss. At the same time, money is not his highest priority. He said he would rather earn 300 JD working in Wadi Rum than 1000 JD in a job that made him miserable. I agreed.
He also said that he would not need many more people in his life than his mother, father, and friends. Mg seemed deeply connected to both his place and the people around him.
His plan is either to open a gym or a coffee shop in the future. He is very interested in fitness and nutrition and runs an Instagram page dedicated to these topics.
Mg also worked at a nearby observatory as a stargazing show guide. During our conversation he shared several observations about tourism in Wadi Rum:

- Camps operate on annual land concessions. According to Mg, the fee is around 5,000 JD per year. Because land is relatively inexpensive, renting often makes more economic sense than purchasing. My impression was also that many Bedouins are reluctant to sell land that carries family significance.
- Bedouins often name camps after themselves or their families, making it relatively easy to identify whether a camp is locally owned. Many camp owners are Bedouins from Wadi Musa, Petra. According to Mg, there are no foreign owners, "maybe you can find a Palestinian."

We eventually began talking about environmental issues. I told him that I was saddened by the amount of litter visible in parts of Wadi Rum. He replied that the situation is similar in public spaces around the sea in Aqaba.
"Arabs need rules like entrance fees not to throw trash around," he said. "When they pay, they respect the place."

Zawaideh guide, 24 – met briefly during sunset

When I was on top of the dune soon after a jeep stopped by. A young driver came out and said to his guests who were a couple:
Here you can walk around, take pictures, enjoy, all up to you"
He had a very gentle and considerate approach and spoke good English. I

The first thing he said was "beautiful here, no?" And stretched his arms open to take in the surroundings.
He was Zawaideh Bedouin from one of the villages, 24 years old, and worked as a guide. He told me mostly about his jeep, which was a part of the family he said. He learned to drive when he was 12, although it's not usual to learn even younger. “Once you're 18, you're free to drive in the desert on your own” his father had told him.
He invested a lot recently into the jeep, and I had the impression he was taking better care of his jeep than most people around here do. He said now he doesn't have much money left and had hoped to earn it back this season, but "Trump happened".
His tourists came back and he offered me a ride and was surprised when I refused. I sat back but soon 3 more jeeps came by and parked.

Appendix E

Translated conversation sample

Arabic speaker: "صديقي كما ترى حياتنا بسيطة وأنا عبد البساطة."
Translation: "My friend, as you can see, our life is simple—and I love simplicity."

Arabic speaker: "هل تعرف أن تفعل خبز النار بالقمح؟"
Translation: "Do you know how to make bread over the fire using wheat?"

Me: "I know how to make a fire, but I don't know how to make bread."

Arabic speaker: "حسن غدا في هذا التوقيت سنفعل عشاءنا خبز النار."
Translation: "Alright, tomorrow at this time we will make our dinner—fire bread."

Arabic speaker: "صديقي أن خبز النار لا يفعله أي شخص."
Translation: "My friend, making fire bread isn't something just anyone can do."

Me: "I'd be really proud if I manage to make it."

Arabic speaker: "صديقي هي بالأساس إنها البساطة فهو أبسط أبسط شيء الخبز إن لم تعرف تفعله فلن تعرف تفعل أي"
Translation: "My friend, it's really about simplicity. Bread is the most basic thing—if you can't make it, you won't be able to do anything else."

Me: "It's good to learn the basics."

Me: "I have a tent with me and I would like to one day go for a long hike in the desert and sleep on my own. Do you think that's possible? I can do that, right?"

Arabic speaker: "صديقي أنت المرحل هذه لقد وصلتها وتخطيتها"
Translation: "My friend, you've already reached and gone beyond this stage."

Appendix F

Notable scenes

Bedouin siesta

> *A few Bedouin men, some of which I knew from the village, came unexpectedly around 9 am to Ahmad's tent. I offered them tea, and they were pleased, but one of them tried it and said there was no sugar. I had put one full glass of sugar on half a litre of water. They made new tea.*
>
> *"Cigarette, hashish, tea, good. This enough for Bedouin," one of the men told me. They had also brought sweets, dates, sweetened iced tea, and several packs of cigarettes, all of which they left to me when they left.*
>
> *I went outside to take care of the sheep. My energy quickly went down from the hot sun mixed with all the things consumed, so I went back to the camp*

to rest, and find the others sleeping deeply. All around them were packages of sweets, cigarettes, and flies. One of the men kept slapping the flies while sleeping. The whole tent was messy and inhospitable at that moment.

I lay on my backpack close to the entrance. The wooden cover fell several times due to the wind no matter how I secured it with a stone. The day passed like that – unnoticed, swallowed by heat and wind-raised dust, within the tent, with one eye on the sheep grazing outside. By the time my visitors left, it was 4 pm. [39]

The rhythms of the luxurious bubble north

We picked up 3 ladies from Mexico at the gas station. I said welcome to Wadi Rum—spectacularly, as if I were a Bedouin guide—as they squeezed on the back seat. One hour ago, I didn't know where I would be working, or sleeping for that matter.

We drove on through the desert as the sun had already set. The engine shut down several times. The last time it did so, we got stuck in sand. After half an hour of unsuccessful digging in the dark, wind and rain, Mg called someone to pick us up. We left the jeep there in the desert. We reached the camp and first directed the Mexican ladies to their bubble room. One of them sat down on a single bed in front of the panoramic desert view and began sobbing.

In the kitchen, the chef was preparing the whole dinner by himself. I helped take the food to the restaurant. The Mexican ladies were happy to see food, but said "mucho, mucho." In muddy boots, cold, mildly sick, I stayed around them to make sure everything was fine.

I finally went to the building in which I was to sleep, the one for workers. It was a total mess. The corridor looked like it was under construction, the toilet was clogged with cigarettes and the floor dirty with mud. All beds seemed used, with food leftovers, dirty clothes, dirty sheets. Mg, who was there for his first time too, helped me find a relatively clean bed and a blanket. He apologized and said that for him I was a guest first, not a worker.

So after the shower I went down and we ate in the kitchen, but soon we were already getting up, cleaning, smoking.

[39] See Appendix A/audio recordings – from the tent.m4a

The last Bedouin - beneath the Seven Pillars of Wisdom

It was on my third day of hike that I reached the Seven Pillars of Wisdom, around 7 pm. Right beneath the famous rugged mountain, named after the book of T.E. Lawrence, there was a big Bedouin tent. I went to inquire about the best spots to put up my own tent. A man held his phone towards me, and said "helloouuuu, how are you?"

He asked me where I'm from, invited me inside, then lowered the phone. "You don't mind, do you? I will delete if you want."

He was around 40 years of age, and inside of the tent was his family, 3 or 4 brothers between 20 and 30, and 2 boys. They sat me down next to the campfire and proceeded to pray for about 5 minutes or so. After the prayer they brought a big tray with fatteh dish. We gathered around the tray, and when I saw my hands dirty from the whole day of hiking, I said I cannot eat with my hand. "No problem" they said, to one spoon already on the tray.

After dinner, as several more men came in and gathered, the man who greeted me started making Bedouin coffee, "from scratch". The process which included roasting and grinding the beans, and infusing the freshly ground coffee with cardamom, was filmed by one of his brothers, while AB narrated what he was doing, sometimes in Arabic, sometimes in English.

"I try the coffee first, and if it's not good, I have to remake everything"
"I hope then that it's good", I said jokingly.

"You're welcome" he replied solemnly and nodded.

Then the coffee was first served to me, the guest. If I had also said it was no good, AB would have to make everything again from scratch.

I sat there, part of the recorded ritual, as the honourable guest, and AB the generous host.

AB fell silent for a time. "I am the last Bedouin" he said, half-absently.

"What do you mean?"

"This is not good hospitality."

"What do you mean it's not good? You gave me everything, what more could I ask for?"

"You go to my neighbour, maybe he kills a goat for you. Go to my second neighbour, maybe he kills two goats for you" he said seriously. A guy next to me chuckled.

When I was to leave, AB went out of the tent with me, and directed me to a good place to camp, although he first offered me to stay in his tent – "one, two, three nights, how much you want". I said I couldn't thank him enough, but that I wished to camp in my tent.

"You're welcome" he repeated.