

through a cut in the rock known as the “siq”. We spent the whole day in Madain Saleh, having lunch at our guide’s farm in the middle of the site (a lovely position under palm trees), and this amount of time was really necessary as the site is so extensive.

Below the Nabataean town is a station on the Hejaz Railway which has been well restored and contains a complete engine, next to an Islamic fort where the English explorer Charles Doughty had such a miserable time when staying there in the late nineteenth century. While staying in al Ula, where we were based for 3 nights, we were able to explore the desert canyons round about with 4-wheel drive cars. There’s a famous wind-eroded rock there called “mammoth” rock because of its curious resemblance to that animal. The red rocks of this area, the Jebel Hejaz, are very fine, and a day in 4-wheel drive cars gave the group a different experience, which they seemed to enjoy. al Ula itself was an important stopping place first on the incense route from South Arabia and later on the pilgrim route to Makkah and the mediaeval town has been partially restored. From al Ula we went by coach beside the Hejaz Railway for a bit, to see other stations on the route, near bits of the railway which T.E. Lawrence famously blew up during the Arab Revolt in 1917.

For lunch we stopped at the remains of the magnificent Khaybah Dam, and reached Madinah about tea-time. Of course we were unable to enter Madinah but saw the minarets of its famous mosque from the ring-road. From Madinah airport we flew to Jeddah to finish our trip with 2 days exploring the old town, the Balad, and taking a leisurely sail down the Creek - a lovely way to spend our last day.

We were invited to the British Consulate for our last night in Jeddah, at the invitation of a Jeddawi lawyer who wanted to honour a member of our party who had worked with him on and off for 30 years. This was a bit of a treat for the group. On the last day we visited the museum of Abdul-Raouf Khalil, which contains splendid collections of Islamic artefacts and examples of architecture, costume and other products of Saudi Arabia itself.

I am hoping to take another trip in January 2011 along the same route and to follow this with a visit to the South-West, Najran and Abha and finishing with 3 days snorkelling on the Farasan Islands.

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