

# A VISIT TO MADAIN SALEH

rising from the centre of the plain. Of the original Nabatean city itself very little has remained as the construction of the city itself was carried out using mud as the basic building material. Potshards and other occupational debris have identified building sites.

There are four basic tomb complexes that have been given names.

**Buthaynah**, appears to be the largest of the tomb sites with many unfinished tombs and different types of burial shelves, pits and closets.

**Al Diwan**, is a large, single room hollowed out of solid rock, some 13 meters square and about 8 meters high. It is considered to be a Nabatean shrine



or sanctuary and many historians believe the many carvings in the walls represent Dushara, the chief god. **Hreba**, is an outcropping of sandstone containing 13 tombs, which form a circle round it. Some of the tombs have eroded away. A short distance away is an oasis around which fig trees and date palms grow, the ground being irrigated by an ancient well.

**Abolowha**, is probably the best known of the sites as it has adorned the Ministry of Information poster. This is a single solitary tomb cut into a sandstone outcropping in the middle of the plain.

The massive extravagances of the Roman type Palace Tomb at Petra is absent from these tombs, the facades consist of a high doorway flanked by a pair of pilasters with traditional Nabatean capitals and surmounted by an ornate decoration consisting of urns, eagles and sphinxes. The locals have beheaded all the

sphinxes and eagles and unfortunately some of the tombs have also been shot at resulting in a number of the tombs sporting bullet holes in the facades. (see picture E)

The site is about 20km north of Al Ula and is accessible by car from Al Ula, however one may need a 4X4 vehicle once inside the perimeter fence as the loose sand in places may trap the unwary. The best time of the year to visit is during the winter months as the daytime temperatures are then more bearable.

In order to visit Madain Saleh, a permit is required from the Ministry of Antiquities at the new museum near Batha, on the application form for the permit one has to provide the date you wish to visit the site together with vehicle registration number and the names and Iqama details of every individual that will be in the vehicle. The recently opened Arac Hotel in Al Ula has introduced a package deal. Visitors staying for more than 2 nights in the Hotel will have the required permits to visit Madain Saleh arranged for them and 4-wheel drive vehicles and guides provided.

A visit well worth making, to take a step back in time and to marvel at the craftsmanship of a forgotten time.



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