

Bedoin & Breakfast with Maxie in Wadi Rum

By Michael Kallenbach, The Mail on Sunday, 14th December 2008



Arabian adventure: Michael Kallenbach with Maxie

Adam, my travelling companion, and I glanced furtively at each other as the realisation quickly dawned that we were the only two blokes among the nine-strong group of horse-riders about to traverse the spectacular mountains and sands of the Wadi Rum desert.

We were huddled in front of the Seven Pillars of Wisdom mountain peaks in Jordan, christened as such by TE Lawrence and used by him as the title of his autobiography. As we posed for a group photo, I wondered aloud whether Adam, a 30-something London banker, shared my view that the women might take pity on us and pamper us.

Our camping skills, or rather the lack of them, were put to the test on our first night when our Bedouin guides told us to assemble our tiny dome-shaped tents, knock the pegs into the ground and carry over-filled buckets of water and feed to the horses. All this came after more than six hours in the saddle on feisty Arab steeds, in temperatures nudging 100F, with powder-like dust flying in our faces every time we

Rather forlornly, I looked up at Adam for help. It wasn't forthcoming. Both of us were stumped. I had never been on a camping holiday and was clueless. Adam admitted that he was even more inept when it came to tacking up the horses.

Luxury riding safaris in Africa, with bucket showers and beds with hot-water bottles, were one thing but this was a more basic affair. Quite frankly, I had no idea what I was in for. After all, I grumbled to myself, I came for the riding, not to learn to assemble a tent.

Luckily there was Amy-Ruth, the youngest member in our group. She's an intrepid traveller and keen camper who had taken a year off from her job as a nurse (she told me she specialises in broken hearts, literally). She knew exactly what to do and was willing to help us both.

We had already fathomed out how to have a wash, learning to balance a small plastic jug of tepid water in the thick desert sand while trying to smother ourselves with liquid soap. In the evenings, I

would attempt to shave, using a wing mirror of one of the 4x4s that the grooms used to ferry water for the horses.

The women in our group took it all in their stride. Not once did they complain about the tough sleeping conditions or lack of running water.



Dusty trek: The riders in the wilderness of Wadi Rum

During the middle of the day when the sun beat down on the impressive sandstone and granite carvings, several of the women would spare the Bedouins their duties and voluntarily carry buckets of water to the thirsty horses.

Adam and I ducked out of this and remained on our thin foam mattresses. It was, after all, the perfect opportunity to take in the mountain gorges and prehistoric carvings that make up the natural beauty of the Wadi Rum, known to the Arabs as the Valley of the Moon.

We also thought we'd take the chance to rest up in preparation for our horseback journey to our next overnight stop.

During breaks, some amused themselves with chick-lit. Amy-Ruth, though, carried with her the latest copy of *Horse And Rider* and raised laughter and curious interest as she pointed out descriptions of the beautiful English countryside to our Bedouin guides.

The riding was fast and furious and we quickly became used to the drill. Faleh, our Bedouin guide, who was always in front, would stop, look around very patiently and instruct us to 'tighten our girths'. He carried an ornamented dagger at his waist but we never knew what its purpose was - perhaps simply for show.

All our horses were Arabs, and their somewhat dainty feet belied their robustness. Powerful and strong, they were forward-going and there was never a need to kick them into a canter or gallop. They knew their job well, and after six days in the Wadi Rum I felt they were willing to go on for several more.

Luckily, too, we had a group of competent and confident riders. As Julia and Pip said in unison: 'The group is only as good as the weakest rider.'



Iconic footsteps: Peter O'Toole in Lawrence of Arabia

Thankfully we had no weak riders among us, and Faleh regularly encouraged us to gallop in the tracks of Lawrence of Arabia for stretches of up to 15 minutes at a time.

As I dug my weight into my stirrups, I recalled all the riding lessons I'd had over recent years with my instructor, Jonelle Richards, back home in Wiltshire. She would regularly boss me around as she shouted out commands.

But it all paid off and she taught me invaluable lessons on how to survive on horseback. She knows her job well - as she should, for she is a top-class eventer.

From the beginning, I made sure my horse, Maxie, a gelding, knew who was in charge. Faleh the guide had ridden him in the past, so his place was always up front. Now it was somewhat of a struggle to hold him at the back, and I sometimes got into trouble with one of the German riders who, on a stallion, would bark 'Achtung!' when she thought Maxie and I were getting too close to her.

But that wasn't the end of it with the two German travellers - true to form, they managed to sneak the best mattresses into their tents at night before anyone else could get to them and insisted that the Bedouins should not even dream of letting us use them.

Was this, I wondered, their version of using towels to bag the best sun-loungers at seaside resorts?

Adam and I got our own back by helping ourselves to two mattresses, rather than the one allowed. No one was the wiser, and we both slept much better.

Everyone had bought their own keffiyeh, the Arab men's headscarf. They have been used by the Bedouin through the centuries as a symbol of honour and tribal identification. I nicknamed mine the dishcloth, for it reminded me of one, although it was perfect for keeping the sand out of my face.

Before each ride the Bedouins would demonstrate how to drape them over our heads to prevent exposure to the sun.

Secretly, we were probably all trying to ape Lawrence of Arabia, undoubtedly the best-known Western wearer of the keffiyeh, who had chosen a plain white one during his famous involvement in the Arab revolt in the First World War.

Mohammed was our chef and he deftly managed to produce meals in the desert with incredibly few utensils and a small two-plate gas stove. He cooked some truly tasty fare, even though a group of French riders we encountered en route complained bitterly that they expected patisserie with their food.



Taste of the desert: A meal is prepared for the group

Our breakfasts were typical local food, comprising eggs, olives, cheese and pitta bread, with generous lashings of local honey. Lunches were perfect. We would always find a shady spot under a huge rock and prop up the ubiquitous foam mattresses to give us back support. Then we would carefully tuck into plates loaded with houmous, mutabbal (aubergine with sesame paste) and finely chopped tomatoes and cucumbers before falling into a slumber. The evening meals consisted mostly of chicken or lamb. We never went hungry and all the meals were meticulously prepared.

By the end of the six nights in the desert, Adam and I had mastered the art of tent-erecting and would see who could finish first.

When it came to saying goodbye to the group, Adam turned to those who had looked after us in such a motherly fashion and said: 'Thank you all for teaching me to tack up a horse. I did learn something that was useful - putting up a tent, perhaps less so.'

Travel facts

Michael Kallenbach's trip was arranged by riding holiday specialists Ride World Wide (01837 82544, www.rideworldwide.com). Prices start at £1,375 for a nine-day trip to Jordan, which includes six days' riding in the Wadi Rum, a tour of Petra, a night on the Red Sea and a day trip to the Dead Sea. The company will organise tailor-made trips for groups of four or more. Flights not included. Bmi (www.flybmi.com, 0870 6070555) operates a daily direct service from Heathrow to Amman with return fares starting from £415.90.