

# The King's Highway

From Amman to Petra the King's Highway (Road 35) winds south through some of Jordan's loveliest scenery and past a wealth of historical sites. It is an ancient route, which follows the ridge of mountains east of the Dead Sea rift along a line of freshwater springs and has been used throughout history by armies, traders and pilgrims, all of whom have left their mark. One of the first references to the King's Highway is in the Book of Numbers, when the Israelites request passage through Edom but are refused: 'We will go by the king's highway,' they said, 'we will not turn to the right hand nor to the left, until we have passed thy borders' (*Numbers 20: 17*).

A better translation than 'king's highway' is probably 'royal road', a generic term often used in the ancient Near East to describe a main transit route. In the 1st millennium BC the Transjordanian 'royal road' linked the kingdoms of Ammon, Moab and Edom, and later the Nabataeans used it to transport luxury goods from Arabia, particularly frankincense and other aromatics and spices. After Rome took over Nabataea, Trajan remodelled and in places rerouted the road to facilitate the passage of troops and called it the Via Nova Traiana.

Mount Nebo and other holy sites near the King's Highway attracted early Christian pilgrims and under the Crusaders, who built fine castles like Karak along it, the ancient road became the main thoroughfare of Oultrejourdain. Muslim pilgrims used the King's Highway until the Ottomans developed the Tariq al-Bint (Desert Highway; *see p. 215*) as the main haj route to Mecca in the 16th century.

## HESBAN (HESHBON)

From Amman (*Sixth Circle*) take the airport road, turn right towards Naur and before Naur follow the signs to Madaba. Hesban is 22km down this road (map p. 342, 6). A huge tell on the right of the main road as you enter the modern village, marks the ancient site. Follow the brown signs to the site entrance, where a small side gate should be open; if it is locked ask in the village.

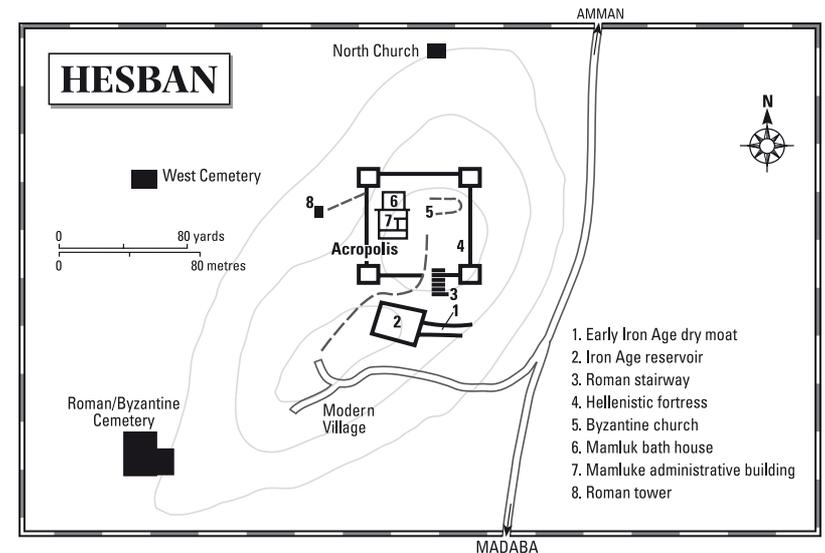
Just inside the site entrance there are signboards for teaching purposes, one of which details the history of ancient Heshbon; further up the path is a useful site map. Excavations on the tell have revealed structures from various periods of Hesban's long occupation.

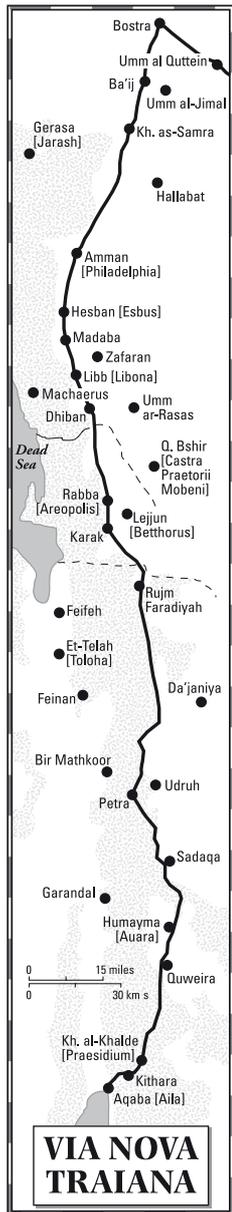
## HISTORY OF HESBAN

Hesban, biblical Heshbon, is described in the Bible as the city of Sihon, king of the Amorites, whose land was conquered by the Israelites under Moses (*Numbers 21*). However, there appears to be a discrepancy between the biblical account and the archaeological evidence, for no Late Bronze remains have been found at Hesban. After the conquest of Canaan, we are told, Heshbon was allotted to the tribe of Reuben, but by the 8th century BC the city was under Ammonite control. One biblical reference locates Heshbon in Moab (*Isaiah 16: 8–9*), but this is inconsistent with other evidence, though it is conceivable that the ancient borders fluctuated. In the Graeco-Roman period Hesban was called Hesbus or Esbus; according to Josephus (*Jewish Antiquities XV, 294*) it was fortified by Herod the Great and settled with veterans, perhaps to protect his border with the Nabataeans. Esbus was at the key junction of the Via Nova Traiana and another Roman road which linked the town with Livias, Jericho and Jerusalem. At the beginning of the 3rd century it was raised to municipal status by Elagabalus and minted its own coins.

In the Byzantine period Hesbus was an important bishopric; it is represented among the towns of Transjordan in the 8th-century mosaic pavement of the church of St Stephen at Umm ar-Rasas (*see p. 180*) and again in a mosaic from the 8th-century Church on the Acropolis at Ma'in, now exhibited in the Madaba Archaeological Park. Despite fairly scant occupation in the early Islamic period, Hesban flourished again after the Crusades and in the 14th century became the capital of the Belqa district.

Note down to the right the Bronze Age cave and deep trench of the **Early Iron Age dry moat (1)** (c. 1200 BC) which runs east–west across the south slope of the tell. Here also is a massive plastered **Iron Age reservoir (2)**, dated to the late 10th/





**Nova Traiana**, which can now be easily followed much of the way for the next 18km north to the edge of the Wadi Hasa. This is one of the most interesting and best-preserved sections of Roman road in Jordan. The roadway, 20 Roman feet

tower' and of particular interest are several **rock-cut houses**, reached by climbing up on the left just beyond the gateway to the east end of the ridge. In the courtyard of the best-preserved house a silt trap and channel are connected to a large plastered cistern and there is a small step up to a vaulted room which still has traces of greeny-blue, red and brown painted plaster. Return to the deep passage which leads from the gate and climb up to the opposite side where, a short distance further, there are a couple of large caves looking west to Sela village. One of these has many 'cup holes' inside and hewn out of the back wall is a large block of rock with a step which has suggested to some a rock-cut 'throne'; it is very blackened from recent use.

Higher up on the plateau twelve steps lead up to a **platform** on a small isolated rock c. 3m high, perhaps an altar or 'high place'. Sela's summit is riddled with other Nabataean cuttings and cisterns, many still plastered; as always with the Nabataeans, water storage was a primary concern. Take time to wander around—views from the plateau of the surrounding mountains and valleys, once intensely cultivated but now wild and desolate, are magnificent.

### EXCURSION TO WADI HASA AND THE VIA NOVA TRAIANA

**Garandal** (*map p. 343, 14*) is signposted to the left c. 3km south of Al 'Ain al-Beidha. Here a well-preserved Byzantine church was discovered beneath later Islamic buildings. Geometric mosaics decorated the narthex and side aisles; the nave was paved with plain stone slabs.

Continue through Garandal on the road to Jurf ad-Darawish and after 12km fork left to **at-Tuwana**, ancient *Thana*, 3km away, a huge, unexcavated site which straddles the road and the wadi. A large building of well-cut limestone blocks on a ridge to the right of the road may be Nabataean. Its three sections are interconnected by doors. Most of the structures on the left-hand side of the road are Islamic.

Some 4km further, turn left and immediately right: at the junction here is a **Roman milestone of the Via**

wide, has a foundation of fieldstones laid between raised kerbs and a central spine. Regular milestations, often with clusters of milestones, mark the distance; there are good examples at 5km, 10km and 11.5km past the junction. Bear left along a graded track 13km after the junction, pass more milestones and a small tower and after 3.5km, just beyond the 58th milestone from Petra, note the square fort of Rujm Faradiyah left of the road. Faradiyah is strategically located above Wadi Ja'is to the west, where there is a perennial spring, and presumably monitored traffic along the highway.

About 2km north of the fort, past another milestation, the Via Nova begins its descent to **Wadi Hasa** and can no longer be followed by car. With a gradient of between six and ten percent, the road descended 500m from the plateau to the wadi bed and crossed the Hasa on an arched bridge to Al-'Aina, about 10km upstream from the King's Highway.

### THE VIA NOVA TRAIANA

One of Trajan's first concerns after annexing Nabataea in 106 was to ensure good communications and the Via Nova Traiana, a grand trunk road which bore the emperor's name, formed the backbone of his new province of Arabia. Completed between 111 and 114, it ran between the provincial capital Bostra (now in Syria) and the port of Aila (Aqaba) on the Red Sea, *a finibus Syriae usque ad Mare Rubrum* ('from the boundaries of Syria as far as the Red Sea') as some of the milestones proclaim, a distance of some 400km. Many milestones name C. Claudius Severus, governor of *Provincia Arabia* throughout the period of building. Early milestones bear numerals that indicate the distance from Petra, seemingly the original 'hub' of Trajan's Via Nova, but by the reign of Commodus (180–193) calculations were made from Bostra. For much of its length the Via Nova followed the King's Highway, although in certain areas, for example at the key crossings of the wadis Mujib and Hasa, the Roman engineers opted for different routes some distance from the old road. Forts and watchtowers along the way were garrisoned with soldiers who protected settlements and commercial traffic. Regular maintenance of such a busy and important artery as the Via Nova was essential and groups of milestones at some milestations, erected under successive emperors, demonstrate the commitment of the Roman authorities to the upkeep of the road. The latest group of milestones from Arabia show that repairs continued at least until the reign of Julian (360–3).

## BUSEIRAH

On the King's Highway, about 15km south of Tafila, just after the left turn to Garandal, is a sign right to Buseirah, 4km to the west (*map p. 343, 14*), on a promontory surrounded by deep ravines. Past the 'town' centre on the left are deserted houses of the Late Ottoman period. Ancient Buseirah is north of the village, at the end of the road, behind the modern school and playground.

### WADI MU' AISRA WEST

For a pleasant and quite easy walk out of Petra along Wadi Mu'aisra West, take the path towards the Deir from the Basin Restaurant and shortly after the generator bear right to scramble uphill and then walk down to the valley where you will see on the left a **tomb with merlons** on the façade. Here the rock colours are quite striking. You soon pass another tomb on the same side and after about 10mins, as the valley opens out, look up to a nice row of **three tomb façades** in the rockface on the right. Half-merlons decorate two of the tombs, while the middle tomb has two rows of stepped merlons in a double attic storey. Continue along the valley, where oleanders grow thickly and the quiet is occasionally interrupted by birdsong. Where the way forks keep right, heading more or less north until you emerge into open country. If you then follow the jeep road to the right, past Wadi Mu'aisra East, you will come to the asphalt road to the Bdul village and Wadi Musa. Alternatively, you can walk ahead across the Shamasa area and down the broad valley to Beidha Neolithic site and the Siq al-Barid (*see p. 306*).

## EXCURSIONS FROM WADI MUSA

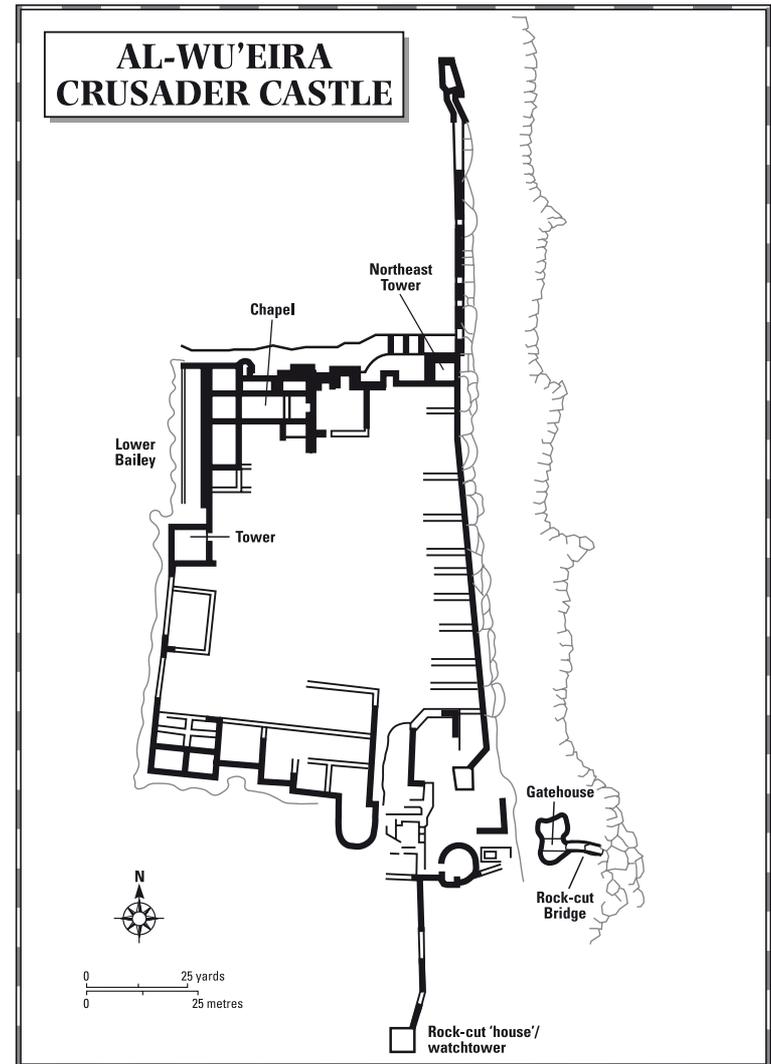
*There are many interesting historical sites and areas of natural beauty in the Petra region. The following are a few suggestions, best visited by car from Wadi Musa, except for Al Wu'eira which can easily be reached on foot. Beyond Beidha you need a four-wheel-drive vehicle.*

### AL WU'EIRA CRUSADER CASTLE

Straddling a ridge west of the road to the Bdul village, c 1.5km from the Crowne Plaza Hotel, is Al Wu'eira Crusader castle (*map p. 259, 6*). Turn left off the tarmac road at an open sandy area and head for a large square tomb. The way down follows a gully 20m left of this, but if you are in doubt about your bearings, the castle is actually visible a little further along the road. About 20m below road-level is the gatehouse, the only entrance—follow the occasionally stepped gully down and round towards it. The rock-cut **gatehouse** spectacularly bridges the deep ravine. Steep gorges surround Al Wu'eira on all sides, making this an easily defensible site.

#### HISTORY OF THE CASTLE

The southern defences were important to the Crusaders, both to protect their exposed flank and to keep control of the trade and pilgrimage routes through Aqaba. Baldwin I led an expedition to these parts in 1115 and founded the castle of Montreal (Shobak). Construction began at Al Wu'eira, called *Le Vaux Moise* (Moses Valley), the next year and probably at Aila/Aqaba too. In 1144 the castle was seized from the Franks who, unable to recapture it by military means, had to resort to burning the olive groves on which the Turks who had seized it were dependent. It fell to Saladin in 1188.



Pass through the gatehouse arch, noting the benches and niche on the left, and make your way up to the castle. The Crusader work is all 12th century, but there is also evidence of Nabataean occupation: steps, basins, shaft graves and chambers cut into the protruding bedrock and a **rock-cut 'house'** at the end of the southern ridge, reused by the Crusaders as a watchtower. There are two more rock-cut houses lower down alongside. The main enclosure is c. 100m by 35m with an extension running north from the northeast tower: the walls cling to the precipitous and slippery edges, making this an impossible site to storm. Inside there are traces of a few rooms. The