



Saying YES!

Journeying all the way to Jordan to acquire the guts to go with guidance

By Katy Koontz

My friend Deborah and I are hustling up a mountain, driven to get to the top for reasons that are not totally clear. All we know is that *we must do this*. We're in Petra, the ruins of an ancient city in the Jordanian desert known for its intricately carved sandstone facades, famously featured in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*.

Our arduous climb has taken longer than planned, but the summit is within reach when we realize we're at a critical point: We may not have time to make it to the top and still get down before our bus—the only transportation out—leaves. So it's decision time: Push on and take the very real chance that we'll be stranded in the desert? Or be sensible and turn back, knowing we've given the quest our best shot?

Our hesitation is only momentary. Giving each other a knowing glance, we continue. But *aaakkkk*—my alarm clock erupts, destroying any chance I have of finding out what happens. What was so important that we find up there? A sage imparting wisdom? A mystical life-changing experience? A window into heaven? I'd never know for certain.

That dream haunted me, and I felt compelled to unlock its secrets. Deborah and I had been planning a 2001 visit to Petra with our families, but when tensions in the Middle East reached a flashpoint with the start of the Second Intifada, suicide bombers regularly making headlines, we opted to wait. By the time the

worst seemed over, years had passed. Then, each time we'd have a potential opportunity to make the trip, something would intervene.

Finally, 12 years later, I had a chance to go to Israel and decided to cross the border into Jordan to see Petra. Deborah wouldn't be with me, but she lent me a favorite silver necklace so I could bring a bit of her along. And off I went.

Passage Through Petra

A light drizzle began as I waited to meet my guide outside the gates to Petra, once the capital of the Nabateans, controllers of a thriving spice trade industry among India, Greece, the Roman Empire, and China for nearly 400 years, starting about 300 B.C. Mahmoud, my guide, was a college graduate in his late 20s who spoke fluent English and was a member of the Babdoul tribe of Bedouins. Born in Petra's tomb caves, he'd lived there for two years until 1985, when UNESCO named Petra a World Heritage site.

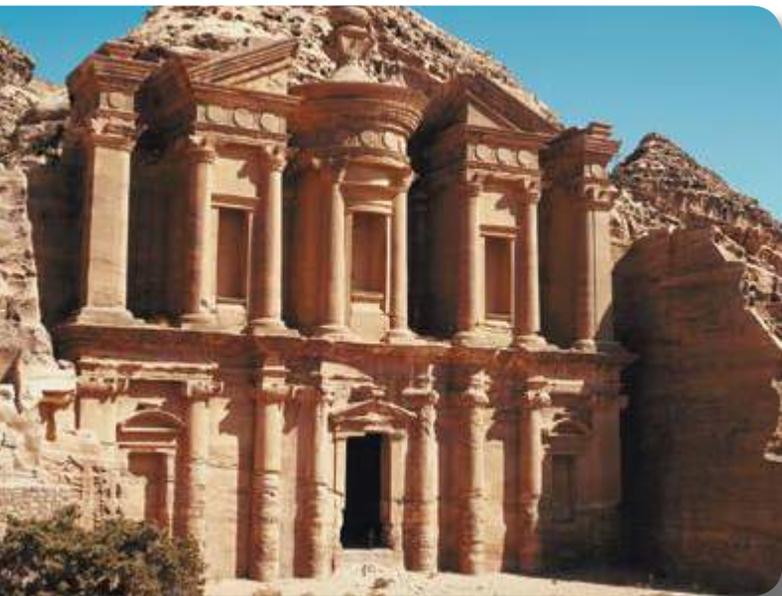
Mahmoud led me through a mile-long slot canyon known as the *Siq*, Petra's main entrance. The 250-foot-high red-rock walls, twisting this way and that, were adorned with ancient votive niches created as a welcoming gesture to display various gods and symbols from the diverse groups with whom the Nabateans traded. The walk felt almost holy—exactly what the Nabateans had in mind.

The Siq then opened directly in front of the dramatic façade of *Al Khazneh* (“the Treasury”), of Indiana Jones fame. A dozen stories high, it was decked out with Western-style columns, capitals, and pediments carved into rose-colored sandstone sometime during the first or second century. The much smaller, stark interior was thought to be a tomb.

Mahmoud and I walked another mile down a narrow valley hemmed in by craggy mountains and known as *Wadi Musa* (the “valley of Moses”). We passed more tombs, including some with once-sharp corners and edges so eroded by sandstorms that they appeared to be melting—their rock faces naturally marbled with swirling stripes of reds, pinks, rusts, and beige. The remains of a 6,000-seat Greco-Roman-style theater, also carved into the rock, and a colonnaded street added to the ambiance.

At the end of the valley sat a mountain, at the top of which was a second-century grand façade called *Ad Deir* (“the Monastery”). As we climbed the 800-some steps carved into the mountainside by the ancients, I wondered if this was my dream mountain.

The long, hard climb followed a narrow path past countless tables manned by Bedouin merchants. Many tended small fires, over which they heated kettles, and some offered us tea. As we climbed, the views of Petra grew increasingly dizzying, and by the time we reached the top, the drizzle had become steady. It was well worth the effort to see the ruined temple—its 165-foot-wide facade towering 150 feet above the ground with a massive 25-foot-high doorway—yet it didn’t quite feel like the mountain in the dream.



Ad Deir (commonly called “the Monastery”), Petra’s largest monument

The prize was what happened at the choice point: It was all about the decision to say *yes!*—even when (and perhaps especially when) it didn’t make much logical sense.

On the way back down, I asked Mahmoud about the signs I’d seen near the Treasury pointing to another carved-step path up a different mountain to a site called the High Place of Sacrifice.

“Save that for next time,” he warned. “The steps will be slippery, and you don’t have time.” We said goodbye, and I went to admire the restored mosaics in a Byzantine church built here after Petra’s prime.

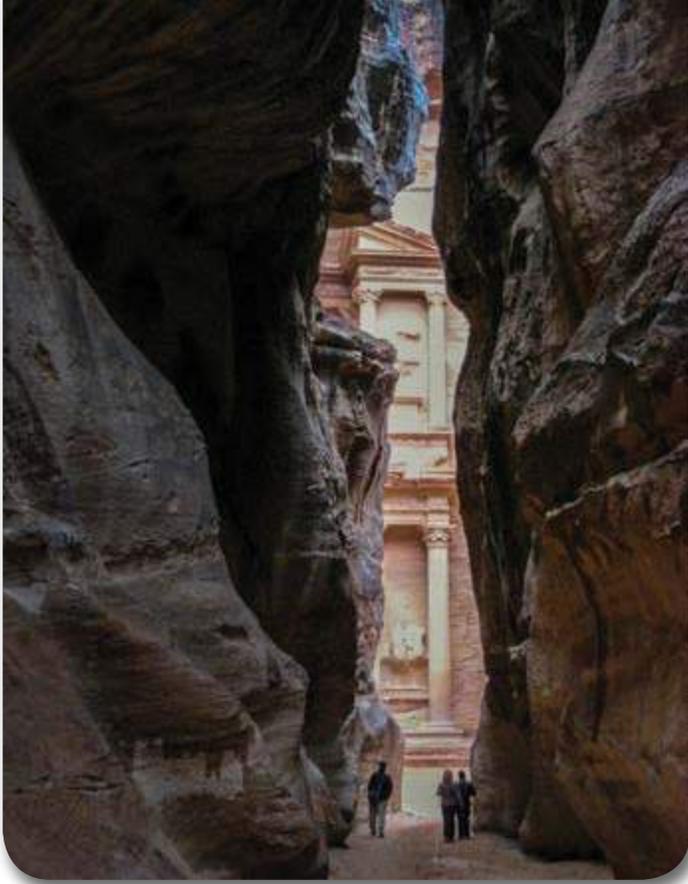
The climb to the monastery was probably the mountain in the dream, I thought. After all, everyone comes here to walk up there. Exiting the church, I headed toward the row of the four Royal Tombs overlooking the valley. *Mahmoud was right, I thought as I explored each of them. It’s late and I’m tired. It’s not like I didn’t climb any mountain—I made the logical choice.*

It was 3 p.m. and although the guards wouldn’t lock the gate for another two hours, droves of wet tourists were leaving and even most of the Bedouins had packed up. Soaked myself, I headed back toward the Siq and the exit.

But moments later, as I was about to pass the sign announcing the way to the High Place of Sacrifice, I hesitated. *What if this really is it, and I never come back? Shouldn’t I at least try?* As in the dream, I’d reached a critical point: If I hustled, I might make it, but there was no guarantee. The irony that I’d put myself in the same position as I had been in the dream was not lost on me. And that’s when I realized I really had no choice. Up the steps I scrambled.

The Second Staircase

The route was somewhat shorter but much steeper than that to the Monastery, and I had to stop occasionally to catch my breath. I passed not a soul, neither tourist nor Bedouin. The steps chiseled into the unforgiving rock were occasionally slippery, with no handrail. Rounding one corner, I found a torrent of rainwater cascading down the steps, soaking my already-wet sneakers. On either side of the path was a steep drop-off. *If I slip and fall, I lamented, no one will find me until tomorrow.* This was not Disneyland—guards did no final sweep.



I had no idea how far the path went, or even what exactly I was looking for. But on I went, the surreal nature of my rushed ascent matching the mood of my dream. I'd certainly found the right mountain! By the time I neared the top 40 minutes later, the imposing tombs below looked like dollhouses.

Passing a pair of 20-foot stone obelisks, I soon saw a sign with a map for the High Place of Sacrifice, although I didn't recognize any of the formations the map outlined. I heard talking and looked up to see a Bedouin woman clutching a small metal flute emerge from a little teashop on a nearby rock outcrop, followed by two tourists. She appeared to be leading them to the actual sacrifice site, so I followed. The tourists turned out to be a mother-daughter pair from Holland who had hiked up a back route. We kept climbing short flights of stairs in different directions, and I wondered if the Bedouin woman was taking us on a wild goose chase.

Reaching an overlook, we peered down at the valley 550 feet below. The few people we could make out who were walking toward the exit looked like poppy seeds. After rounding a few more outcroppings, we arrived at the summit, where we found a 50- by 20-foot platform with stone benches and a central low, stone table. Four steps led to another rock platform where a carving of a Nabatean deity once stood, not far from a round stone basin (complete with a carved channel) and a cistern for washing. This was the High Place of Sacrifice, whose rituals had long since been lost to time.

After exploring a bit, we all took the long, wet walk back to the entrance gates, where we were among the last people

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ushered out. I trudged back to my hotel, drew a hot bath, and actually fell asleep momentarily in the tub.

Pondering what about the place had been so important, it dawned on me that it wasn't about what I saw, or even about what occurred there. The prize was what happened at the choice point: It was all about the decision to say *yes!*—even when (and perhaps *especially* when) it didn't make much logical sense.

The lesson was subtle, yet powerful. What other guidance had the universe whispered to me over the years, I wondered, that I had not recognized? What miraculous moments had I missed by being casually dismissive, thinking the practical path was best?

Recently, my reflections deepened when I discovered that the same mountain—*Jabal Madhbah* (“mountain of the altar”)—is considered by many to be the biblical Mount Sinai, where Moses was given the Ten Commandments. *Of course!* I thought. *Who wouldn't feel compelled to follow in those sandals?* The commandment I received on Madhbah came not at the mountain's summit but at its foot—and the gift had not involved receiving but rather responding.

With practice, I've found that each time I follow my gut and honor my guidance, answering in the affirmative is even easier the next time. Sometimes I still lean into yes, but more often these days, I leap. 🌊



Al Khazneh (“the Treasury”) peeking through the end of the slot canyon known as the Siq (top left); and the author (above) in the rain atop the High Place of Sacrifice, wearing her friend's silver necklace.