

Jordan in Spring

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Fly Amman, transfer Madaba
Day 2/3	Excursions from Madaba
Day 4/5	Azraq
Day 6/7	Wadi Dana
Day 8/9	Petra
Day 10	Wadi Rum
Day 11/13	Aqaba
Day 14	Amman
Day 15	Fly London

Departs

March or April

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code JOR01) or brochure

Grading

Mostly easy walks, with longer – but fairly gentle – day walks in the Petra and Wadi Dana areas.
Grade A/B

Focus

Birds and archaeology

Highlights

- Visit world-famous Petra and spectacular Wadi Rum
- Float in the Dead Sea
- Enjoy medieval castles and the Graeco-Roman ruins at Jerash
- Explore Azraq, and Shaumari and Wadi Dana Wildlife Reserves
- Look for Tristram's Serin and other specialist desert species
- Enjoy the spectacle of the spring bird migration at Aqaba on the Red Sea



Images from top: Masked Shrike, Common Chameleon & Ortolan Bunting (courtesy of Tim Melling)



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Itinerary

Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Day 1

Amman

Arrival at Amman's Queen Alia International Airport from Heathrow is typically at night. We will therefore travel the short distance to Madaba and our hotel.

Day 2

Rift Valley & Dead Sea



Bonelli's Eagle

Leaving Madaba in the morning we will make the short descent to the Rift Valley and the Dead Sea. On the way we will see Mount Nebo (where Moses died) in the distance, and pass the signpost marking "Sea-level". Our first stop of the holiday will be the shore of the Dead Sea, which at 407 metres below sea-level, is the lowest point on Earth. We will notice a marked increase in temperature as we leave the high cool plateau on which Amman stands. Walking by the eastern shore of the Dead Sea, we should soon see most of the local specialities such as Desert Lark, Tristram's Grackle, Blackstart, Bonelli's Eagle, White-crowned Black

Wheatear and Fan-tailed Raven, and perhaps some migrants. We will then visit a nearby colony of the highly-localised Dead Sea Sparrow.

Lunch at a government resthouse will allow those who wish to, to swim – or at least float (actual swimming is almost impossible) – in this intensely saline lake.

Our drive back up to Madaba will take us through the different habitat zones of the Rift Margin, starting with a small reservoir at the foot of Wadi Shu'ayb. Our final stop will be amidst the orange blossom half-way up this lush wadi, and a roadside ramble will soon reveal its Mediterranean character. Birds should include Orange-tufted Sunbird, Masked Shrike, Cretzschmar's Bunting and Smyrna Kingfisher, and being early in the spring, colourful flowers will carpet the valley sides. With luck there will be some raptors overhead, possibly interrupting their northward passage to descend and roost.



Cretzschmar's Bunting

Day 3

Jerash & North Jordan

North of Amman we will soon turn off the main road and explore for birds and flowers along a major river valley. Typical species include Long-billed Pipit and Woodchat Shrike. In the bus we will then climb up to the Dibbin Forest. This is an area of Aleppo Pines, oaks and Strawberry Trees, and in parts ungrazed by goats it is also interesting for flowers and holds a selection of orchids. Here, the avian speciality is the Blue Tit (this is the only place it can be found in the whole Levant area), which should be at home amongst the Jays, Wrens and Blackbirds.



After a picnic lunch in the shade of the pines, we will visit the magnificent ruins at Jerash. This is one of Jordan's finest archaeological sites and we will have a full afternoon to explore and soak up the atmosphere. Originally one of the most important of the Greco-Roman Decapolis cities, Jerash once held a population of 15,000. A large part of the city has now been uncovered or restored, including the magnificent colonnaded street and the South Theatre, which holds 5,000 spectators and is still used today for the annual Jerash Festival. Blue Rock Thrushes and Black-eared Wheatears nest in the ruins.

Day 4

Azraq

Today we will set off east from Madaba, visiting two desert "castles" and sampling the birds of the eastern desert before arriving at Azraq.

Qasr al Kharana, our first stop, is an 8th century Omayyad castle overlooking a stony plain which we will explore for Temminck's Horned Lark and perhaps Red-rumped Wheatear. We will also visit a small Stone Age site where worked flints can be seen.

Qasr al Amra, an Omayyad bath-house, is situated on Wadi al Butm where we will eat our picnic lunch and then explore the tree-lined wadi for migrant birds – we may be lucky and discover a migrant Thrush Nightingale or Collared Flycatcher, amongst the Lesser Whitethroats, Redstarts and other more common migrants.



Temminck's Horned Lark

After a welcome cup of tea, we will visit the Azraq wetland reserve before our evening meal. The huge spring-fed oasis at Azraq was once one of the most important wetland sites in the Middle East. Unfortunately, today it has been adversely affected by water extraction, and the presence of extensive freshwater (and hence our detailed itinerary) will depend on the amount of rainfall during the previous winter. The wetland reserve still contains a few pools and there are boardwalks and a hide from which we hope to see some waterbirds.

Day 5

Azraq

This morning a pre-breakfast walk will take us the short distance across the road and into some suitable habitat and perhaps we will find a Desert Finch, a Wood Warbler or an Ortolan Bunting.

The black basalt desert on the road to Baghdad has a barren appearance but is home to the unique black morph of the Mourning Wheatear and the dark race of the Desert Lark – both adapting to the desert colour here. Bimaculated Larks and Pale Rock Sparrows can be expected only if winter

rain has brought a flush of green grass to the area but this is a little explored area often good for migrants.



Hoopoe Lark

We will tour Azraq Castle, a Roman castle made of basalt blocks where T. E. Lawrence stayed in 1917 and take lunch, before spending the remainder of the day visiting the Shaumari Wildlife Reserve. Shaumari is the site of an ambitious reintroduction programme

for some of Jordan's extinct desert fauna. Most famous is the herd of Arabian Oryx, which now numbers over 200, as well as the Syrian Ass (or Onager), gazelles and a small population of Ostrich. Shaumari is also a good area for desert birds, including Desert Wheatear and Hoopoe Lark, and the tall trees attract a large variety of migrants.

Day 6

Dana Reserve

This will be a travelling day but we will make several stops as we wind our way through the dramatic scenery of the King's Highway, following in the steps of many a trader, army and pilgrim. However, first we must cross the desert back towards Amman and pause back in Madaba to see the 6th century mosaic map in St George's Church.

The next stop will be at the canyon-like Wadi al-Mujib, where hard limestone rocks form ledges in this arid landscape. From the wadi edge we will look for our first Mourning Wheatear and Desert Lark. Further south we will also look for Jordan's national flower, the localised



Black Iris (courtesy of Tim Melling)

Black Iris. We plan to make a roadside stop to photograph them and picnic in an area that holds several species of larks.

A tour of Kerak Castle's many dark passages and underground galleries should be possible before we have to continue on our way south. The castle has a long history used by, amongst others, the Mamelukes and Crusaders.



Scop's Owl (courtesy of Tim Melling)

We will arrive at our campsite (or hotel) overlooking the Dana Wildlands Reserve in the late afternoon in time to allocate tents (or rooms) and photograph the dramatic view in the rich evening colours. The campsite buildings have been designed to merge into the landscape with its curious white sandstone domes. Here, Orange-tufted Sunbirds flit between the tents on the borrag flowers and Black-eared Wheatear and Hoopoe sing from the crags above our heads. A short walk away from the camp (or accommodation) after dark may allow us to hear Scop's Owl, Hume's Tawny Owl or Eagle Owl (all present in the reserve).

Day 7

Dana Reserve

Camping lends itself to early starts and we will be up with the sunbirds to make the most of this dramatic location. Local birds include Orphean Warbler, Rock Sparrow, Chukar, Cuckoo, Spectacled Warbler, Woodlark and Woodchat Shrike, and the variety of other flora and fauna is equally impressive. After breakfast we will head off to explore nearby oak and juniper woodland in the search of the Syrian Serin, which has one of the most restricted distributions of any Western Palearctic bird. We will also be on the look-out for raptors; as well as the locally breeding Griffon Vulture, Short-toed Eagle, Lesser Kestrel and Bonelli's Eagle, the mountains here lie on the main migration route heading north. We will also be able to tour the Dana conservation village, where repopulation of the ancient and fascinating hill village is being encouraged.

Lunch will be at the Dana Guesthouse, with its spectacular view over the wadi. The afternoon will be free to soak up the atmosphere and to explore around the campsite – perhaps sitting by the drinking pool to watch the Yellow-vented Bulbuls and possibly even Tristram's

Serins coming down to drink. Rock Hyrax and Nubian Ibex are still rare in Jordan but the chance of seeing one on the extensive crags below are increasing.



Day 8

Petra

Early risers can make their final explorations around the campsite (or hotel) and take those last photographs but mid-morning we must drag ourselves away and head off south along the King's Highway once more – destination Petra.

En route we will explore Shaubak Castle, before picnicking in the olive groves below this imposing Crusader fortress. Our introduction to Petra will begin with a visit to Bayda (or Little Petra) where, back in history, visitors traditionally stayed before being allowed into Petra. We will also look at a nearby Stone Age village, one of the best preserved in the World after 8,000 years.

Day 9

Petra

The whole day will be spent exploring the extensive site of Petra. One of the most spectacular archaeological sites in the Middle East, Petra dates back to the fifth and sixth centuries BC, when it was an important centre for the Nabataean Arabs. These cultured and artistic people occupied a crucial position in the old caravan routes between Africa, India and Europe, and grew wealthy on their monopoly of this trade. That prosperity fuelled the development of a large city and the construction of a wide array of palaces, temples and tombs, which were elaborately carved out of the multicoloured but mainly red sandstones. The patterns in the sandstones are worthy of a visit in their own right and are as photogenic as the tombs themselves – bring plenty of memory cards!



The horses now only go a short distance (as far as the dam) but most of the party will probably want to walk anyway. After the siq and awe-inspiring Treasury the group could split: some of the group climbing to the High Place and down through Wadi Farasa, others preferring to take the easier route via the Roman amphitheatre and Royal Tombs. We will regroup at a restaurant for a leisurely lunch. In the afternoon, the group could again split if required – those with remaining stamina climbing to the Monastery, whilst the others look at the museums area.

Day 10

Wadi Rum (Camping)

En route, we will stop to admire the view from our high-level road which looks down on Petra and across to Aaron's Tomb against a backdrop of Wadi Araba and the Negev Desert. This is at an altitude of over 1,700 metres (considerably higher than Ben Nevis!), and we will stop briefly to look for Isabelline Wheatear before descending the Ras an Naqab escarpment with our first views of Wadi Rum.

The wadi itself is spectacular: it comprises a vast plain hemmed in by towering cliffs. This place is strongly associated with T.E. Lawrence, as he travelled up the wadi before ambushing the Ottomans in Aqaba; indeed, much of the famous film, *Lawrence of Arabia*, was actually shot in this very location. We will look for the local pair of Verreaux's Eagles above the precipitous cliffs, and below them we will see Mourning and White-crowned Black Wheatears perched on bushes and rocks.

As the temperature cools in the mid-afternoon we will board the jeeps which will take us to our camp in the next wadi, away from the tourists and the bedouin village. Our bedouin-style camp will be laid out for us near a canyon which is one of the best places in Jordan to observe the beautiful, pink-coloured, Sinai Rosefinch and the vocal Scrub Warblers will be close to our tents. The view from a high sand dune nearby is one of the most memorable in a country full of scenic beauty, and we will climb up to see the sunset.



It may be possible to hear Hume's Tawny Owls hooting from the camp but considerable luck will be needed to see one in the torch light.

Day 11

Aqaba

Before departing from Wadi Umm Ishrin we will explore the bushes and rocky slopes for further migrants and resident birds.

The short descent through Wadi al Yutum will bring us to Jordan's only port and coastal resort – the rapidly expanding city of Aqaba. After lunch in a local restaurant, our first afternoon here will be free for swimming, shopping or relaxing. The town has an excellent selection of shops for gifts and souvenirs. There will be the option of a late afternoon walk for those interested.



Sinai Rosefinch

Days 12 – 13

Aqaba

Aqaba's main attraction is its migrant birds. Aqaba, and its Israeli neighbour Eilat, lie on one of the world's major migration fly-ways – between Africa and Eurasia. Literally millions of birds use the geographic line of the Rift Valley to aid their migration – ranging from the largest of eagles to the smallest of warblers. Jordan's side of the border is considerably under-watched compared with the Israeli side and we will no doubt be making discoveries as we explore the sites. There are areas of palm groves and coastal allotments for migrating passerines to rest in, and the Red Sea and its



Marsh Sandpiper

shoreline will also be visited. A highlight of our tour will be a visit to the local sewage works – not on most tourists' itinerary but one of the most productive birdwatching sites in the whole region. The spectacle of hundreds of waders, herons and gulls of up to 75 different species will leave a lasting impression. Waders could include Marsh Sandpiper and Red-necked Phalarope, and the variety of herons may include Glossy Ibis and Purple

Heron. However, the area is known for its vagrants and almost anything can turn up! Finally, of course, there are Aqaba's two resident oriental species – the Ring-necked Parakeet and the Indian House Crow, which either escaped from captivity or arrived from the east on cargo ships.

While some might simply wish to lie on the beach, the enthusiasts can continue to search for birds, and whichever you choose, Aqaba will provide a relaxing finale for the tour.

The Red Sea is famous for its coral reefs and there will be opportunities to go snorkelling (equipment can be hired) or simply to observe the fish and other marine life from the comfort of a glass-bottomed boat (optional extra).

Day 14

Amman

However, this is not quite the end of the tour, as we have to get back to Amman. We will leave Aqaba to make the drive back through Wadi Araba and along the shore of the Dead Sea. Our first stop will be at Fidan, where we will walk a slow circuit across flat Wadi Araba desert. This is an important desert area with a variety of arid-adapted birds, and we will look for Hoopoe Lark and Bar-tailed Desert Lark – listening for their calls and songs so we can home in on them. There is also a chance of seeing a Spotted Sandgrouse or a Cream-coloured Courser. This area also holds a small number of the striking Spine-tailed Lizard (Dhabb in Arabic). Resembling a monitor lizard in size and shape, this formidable-looking animal is actually a vegetarian and readily retreats into its burrow when approached. Nearby acacia woodland holds Little Green Bee-eater and Arabian Warbler and we may be lucky enough to find these specialities. We will continue northwards, making at least two stops before reaching Amman, at Lot's Cave and "Lot's Wife".



Day 15

London

Depending on the time of our flight home, there may be an opportunity for a visit to the large Roman amphitheatre and museum of local costumes and jewellery in downtown Amman (an optional extra by taxi) but in any case we will soon have to leave for our return flight from Queen Alia International Airport.

Images courtesy of Shutterstock & Tim Melling

Tour grading

This is a gentle-pace birding tour on which we will undertake short, leisurely walks. The only exception will be at Petra, where there will be the option of a more energetic tour for those with more stamina; but even this will not be out of the reach of the active walker, as we will have all day to cover the ground. In the desert we will probably move slowly and ensure we make a thorough exploration of the areas that we cover.

Weather

In spring, Jordan's climate is at its most pleasant, if a little unpredictable. At high altitude (Amman, Jerash and Dana) it could be cool at night, before warming up to c.20°C during the day. There is still a slim chance of rain in March and April but the main rainy season is winter and the skies typically remain cloud-free. By the Dead Sea and at Wadi Rum and Aqaba it will be decidedly hotter but not unbearably so, with temperatures possibly reaching 25-32°C at midday. Wherever possible

we will make good use of the cooler mornings – a time when birds are most active and easier to observe.

Food & accommodation included in the price

All food and accommodation are included in the price of the tour. Single rooms may be available at a supplementary cost, but it should be noted it is not available for the night camping at Wadi Rum. Here we will camp in a traditional Bedouin tent – you should expect facilities here to be fairly basic. The tent is large and sleeping is a communal experience with everyone in the same tent. However, most previous clients rate this as one of the best parts of the tour and it gives a real insight into Bedouin life. At Dana we will aim to stay at the permanent campsite, however there are times when this may be closed for maintenance and we will stay in a nearby hotel or guesthouse instead.

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking.

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