

# Spirit-ed tale excites desert explorers

IAN STALKER

Did Lawrence of Arabia share his desert retreat with things that go bump in the night?

Well, if Wadi Rum is home to phantoms, ghosts and other spectral beings, tour guide Ibrahim Abdel-Haq hasn't come across them, despite what he tells those he leads in a dramatic area of sand, cliffs and gorges that T.E. Lawrence himself called "vast, echoing and God-like" and inspired him to write his book *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*.

Abdel-Haq likes to tell temporary desert-dwellers out on a nighttime Wadi Rum hike to a vantage point that faces a somewhat distant mountain of rock about one of his clients who failed to return promptly from a nighttime stroll into a gorge leading into the facing mountain and how he subsequently went out to look for him, only to encounter a strange apparition in the gorge that literally spooked him.

The overdue tourist was later found by Abdel-Haq and, the guide recounts to his groups, upon being asked by his desert-savvy host, "Did you see what I saw?" acknowledges he, too, spotted what the Abdel-Haq labels Danny the Beast.

The story quickly intrigues groups, with intrepid volunteers wanting to cross to the facing rockface and enter the gorge, perhaps hoping to spot Danny themselves.

Abdel-Haq limits the exploratory group to a couple and, after they set off, confides to those who stay behind that the story is a lark and the gorge doesn't exist, leaving them to snicker at the thought

of their fellow travellers baffled as to why they can't locate its entrance.

And a further surprise may be in store for the would-be ghostbusters, as Abdel-Haq may hide in the darkness beneath a sand-coloured blanket, making animal sounds as they return after having given up trying to find the gorge.

Seeing fellow travellers sent on a wild-ghost chase is far from the only attraction of being in Wadi Rum after nightfall, with tourists finding themselves under starry skies in an often awe-inspiring environment that has seen little development.

A lodging option for travellers is The Captain's Desert Camp, which has visitors overnight in large Bedouin tents located at



Wadi Rum is welcoming during the day but does "Danny" lurk there at night?

the base of a towering cliff. They'll be entertained by Bedouin musicians and eat Bedouin food as part of an experience that enables foreigners to temporarily share a lifestyle that dates back centuries.

Four-wheel-drive safaris are available in Wadi Rum, leading people riding in the backs of open-air

vehicles through a region criss-crossed by camel-borne trade caravans long ago. Guides will tell people of the region's history and of wildlife that lives in a desert environment.

And, of course, if Abdel-Haq is their guide, they may get the lowdown on Danny the Beast, which Abdel-Haq has been doing

for years and says never fails to pique interest.

"They always say, 'Let's see what he's talking about' and off they go," Abdel-Haq reports.

More information on The Captain's Desert Camp can be found at [www.captains-jo.com](http://www.captains-jo.com) or by e-mailing [rafiq@captains-jo.com](mailto:rafiq@captains-jo.com).

## Tourists are welcome to lend a helping hand

Malia Asfour is reaching out to travellers who want the world to be a better place than it was when they set out on their Middle Eastern vacation.

Asfour, director of the Jordanian Tourism Board North America, is promoting opportunities for volunteerism in Jordan, saying tourists can take in the country's most famous tourist attractions and also generate goodwill between international travellers and their hosts through good work on the same trip.

"This is a pet project of mine,

and I would really like to see it succeed even more," she said of a type of tourism that is increasingly building a following and helps create a "better place for humanity."

Asfour notes those who want to spend part of their vacation doing volunteer work will have plenty of opportunities, including working at some of the country's many nature retreats or at homes for mentally and physically challenged children in Amman.

Habitat for Humanity is also active in Jordan, building homes

for needy families in villages, a town and Amman.

Participants can join a tour tailored to specific interests, which could include ecotourism, adventure, historical and religious tours in Jordan.

"Participants do not just build houses, they build relationships that resonate across cultures, religions and language. They build bridges and transform lives – not just those of the homeowner family, but also their own," Habitat for Humanity Jordan says.



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