

ARABIAN MARVELS ROCK STARS

DEEP IN A SAUDI DESERT, 2,000-YEAR-OLD RUINS SIT ABANDONED, PERFECTLY PRESERVED. AND VIRTUALLY UNVISITED. THE QUESTION IS, WHY? BY CHRIS WRIGHT

The four columns of Qasr Al-Farid – as compared to the usual two that most tombs sport – may mean its inhabitant was very, very rich.

PHOTO: CORBIS

It is the inscriptions above the doors that really set the place apart. “You are not allowed to use this place, or you must pay.” Other warnings have an even more sinister tone. “May [the god] Dushara curse anybody who buries in this tomb anyone except those inscribed.” Another says: “No stranger has the right to be buried here ...” These could be graffiti on excavated ruins at any well-known tourist site, but they are not. They are inscriptions carved deep into sandstone some 2,000 years ago, by people whose lives we can only guess at, in a place almost nobody knows about or visits. Welcome to Madain Saleh, Saudi Arabia.

“Ten years ago, I retired from a career in the Saudi police department to become a guide here,” Abdul Aziz tells me. He is not a busy man. The day I visit there are about 10 people in total. Last week was busy though; nearly 100 people over the entire seven days.

“My family has been in the area for 1,000 years or more, and moved to Al-Ula (a nearby town) in my grandfather’s

generation,” says Aziz. That was in the 1930s - and even then, the townsfolk didn’t know about Madain Saleh, barely 20 kilometres to the north. A remarkable feat considering the ruins occupy a massive 1,621 hectares.

The more likely reason is that they didn’t want to know; locals tend to view the place with some superstition. Aziz tells me Madain Saleh appears in the Qur’an, which says that the tribe there - the Thamud - were guilty of idol worship, which is forbidden under Islam. Even today, some Muslims consider it against their religion to visit. As a result, there’s virtually no one there. And foreigners rarely come because it’s hard to get visas. For a site that rivals Petra, Palmyra, Persepolis or any of the region’s other great historic treasures, that is astounding.

MEN OF STONE

The fact we can still clearly see the warning inscriptions is an accident of

Abdul Aziz (below), ex-policeman now turned guide to Madain Saleh, is a resident of Al-Ula, where his family has lived for generations.

circumstance, with the dry climate and isolated location acting as preservers. If Madain Saleh was as humid or windy as Petra, or as popular as Persepolis, there would probably be much less to see today. In fact, it is so well preserved it was awarded UNESCO World Heritage status in 2008.

Like Petra in Jordan - carved by the same ancient tribe, the Nabataeans - the site is made up of hundreds of tombs and façades carved deep into the surface of golden sandstone rock, showing incredible precision and artistry.

Their grand and intricate carvings are as remarkable today as they must have been when they were carved into the rock around the time of Christ’s birth. Unlike Petra, whose carved monuments included a treasury, theatre and other buildings, Madain Saleh features tombs. These are chambers cut deep into the sandstone, with ornate façades, some up to 15 metres high. They are decorated with patterns, vases, eagles, snakes, sphinxes, griffins and suns - but never people. More than 30 of them carry inscriptions in Aramaic, allowing researchers to date them. Almost all were built between 1 BCE and 75.



PHOTOS: CHRIS WRIGHT

**TOMB-BUILDING
DOESN'T SEEM TO
HAVE INVOLVED ANY
REVOLUTIONARY
SCIENCE, JUST
TALENT, PATIENCE
AND HARD WORK**



“They started digging from the top down, not the same as if you are building something from the ground up,” says Aziz, standing in front of one of the tombs in his traditional Saudi *thobe* (tunic) and *ghutra* (head scarf). “You can see clearly how they designed and carved their tombs.”

The tombs all bear a similar style. “At the top, all of them have five steps coming down towards each other,” says Aziz. “That is because if anyone attacks or uses the tomb without permission, they feel in their mind it will come [back] five times.”

WORK OF ARTISANS

Most tombs bear clear marks of the chisels used to carve them - probably hard stone or iron. Sandstone is perfect carving material: Aziz takes a hard stone to an outcrop near a tomb to demonstrate how easily it chips away. For bigger blocks, he explains, chains were inserted into carved grooves to saw slabs off the main rock, then the façade was smoothed. It doesn’t seem to have involved any revolutionary science, just talent, patience and hard work. Some tombs probably took years to complete.

Each tomb design reflects a different status, with the biggest and grandest apparently devoted to the wealthiest and most important families. The most impressive are Qasr Al-Bint (Castle of the Girl), a rock containing 31 individual tombs that also boasts the largest single façade, a stunning 16 metres high.

Then there is the extraordinary Qasr Al-Farid (Lonely Castle), hewn out of an isolated rock and featuring the most ornate frontage, with four columns where most have only two. “Maybe the man buried there was rich,” Aziz suggests.

But he has no explanation for the places where you can see clearly that work has been started but never finished. “They are there, just staying. Not finished,” he points out. The reason for the ruins’ abandonment continues to puzzle archaeologists today. Was there

Inside the tombs are alcoves where funeral urns were placed (left, bottom). The exterior, on the other hand, boast decorations like suns (left, top) and warning inscriptions (left, middle). Other features like a carefully carved drainage channel (opposite page, top) also deserve attention.



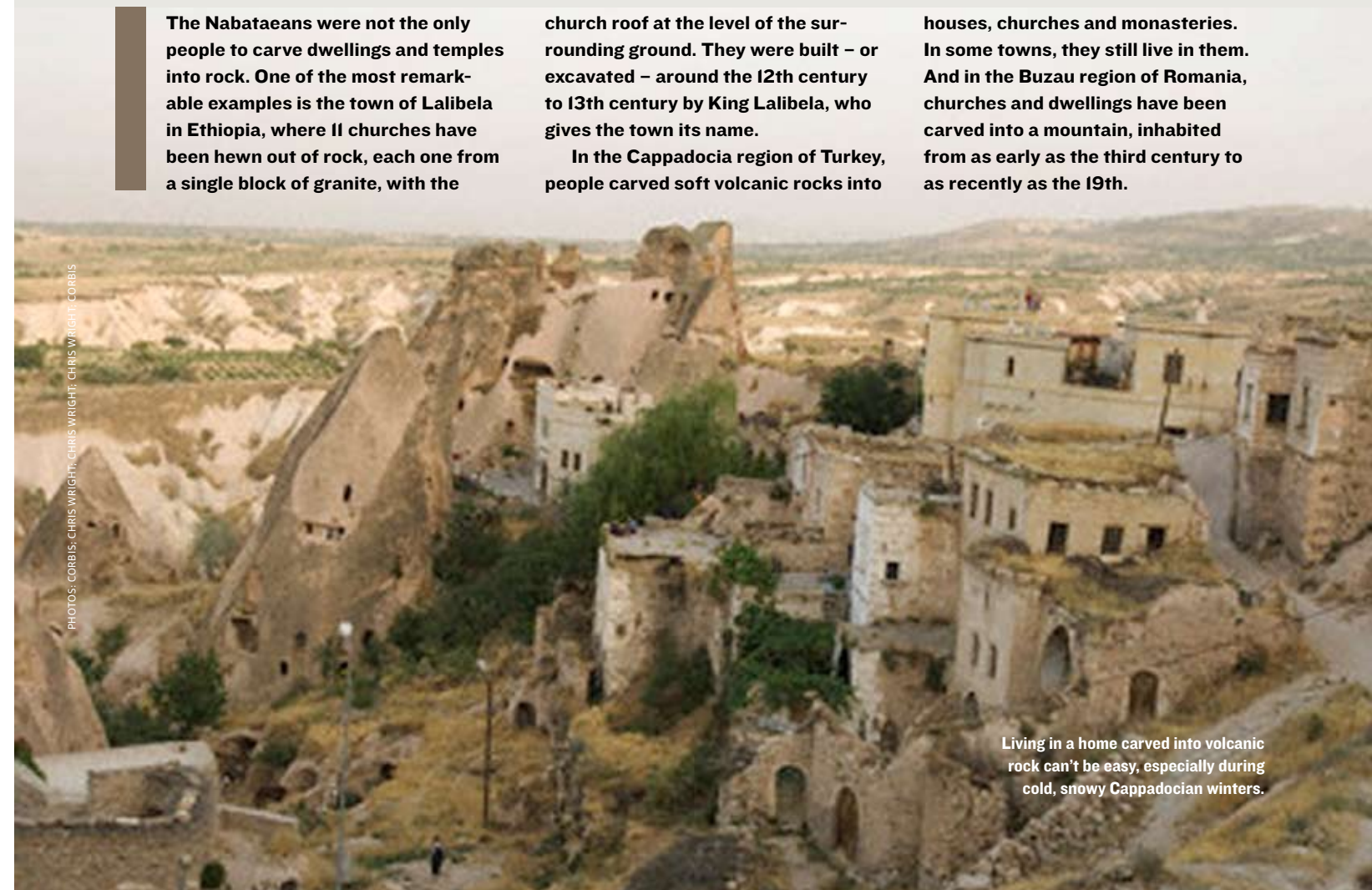
CARVING A HOME

The Nabataeans were not the only people to carve dwellings and temples into rock. One of the most remarkable examples is the town of Lalibela in Ethiopia, where 11 churches have been hewn out of rock, each one from a single block of granite, with the

church roof at the level of the surrounding ground. They were built – or excavated – around the 12th century to 13th century by King Lalibela, who gives the town its name.

In the Cappadocia region of Turkey, people carved soft volcanic rocks into

houses, churches and monasteries. In some towns, they still live in them. And in the Buzau region of Romania, churches and dwellings have been carved into a mountain, inhabited from as early as the third century to as recently as the 19th.



PHOTOS: CORBIS, CHRIS WRIGHT, CHRIS WRIGHT, CHRIS WRIGHT, CORBIS

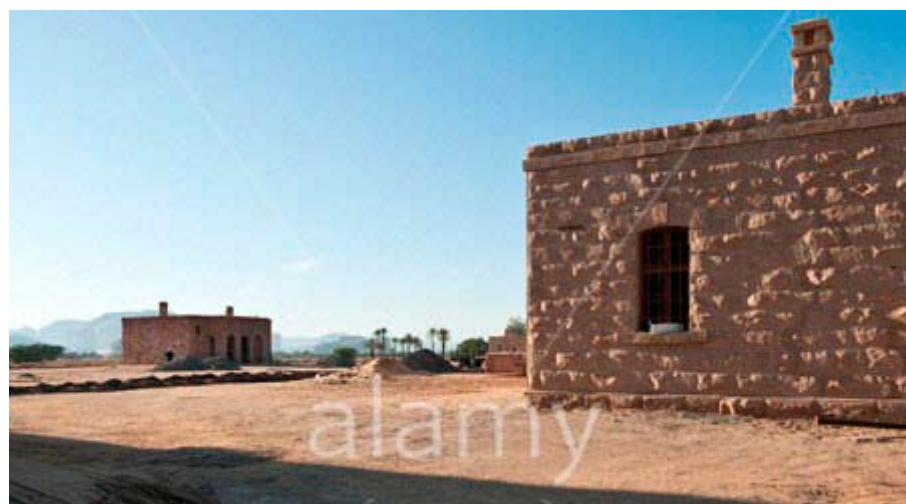
Living in a home carved into volcanic rock can't be easy, especially during cold, snowy Cappadocian winters.

THE NABATAEANS

Madain Saleh ("cities of Saleh"), also known as Al-Hijr ("rocky place"), was first occupied by humans as long as 5,000 years ago, and at one stage hosted members of the Arab Lihyanite kingdom. But it's the Nabataeans, an empire that rose and fell from 120 BCE to 106, who left their mark here. The Nabataeans are said to have been an Arab group, originating from southern Jordan (where Petra, the Nabataean capital, is found) and Palestine. Around 120 BCE, they decided to form their own state, sustained by their

location on the vital overland caravan routes from southern Arabia to the rest of the world.

Apart from their carving skills, they are an important link between the Aramaic and Arabic languages; their inscriptions were Arabic-influenced Aramaic and they may have spoken informally in Arabic. They showed smart engineering for their time too. Madain Saleh is supported by more than 100 wells, while a clever drainage system next to the Diwan (a council chamber or law court) channelled rainfall.



a sudden economic or military catastrophe? We just don't know.

We do know the Nabataean kingdom lasted just over 200 years before being incorporated, apparently without a struggle, into the Roman empire in 106. While their descendants most likely exist across Saudi and Jordan, the culture has long since been absorbed into Arabia. And with it the full story of Madain Saleh and its glory.

SECRET PLACES, SECRET STORIES

The astounding craftsmanship and isolation of this place exhausts me as we

Qasr Al-Bint (above, left) has intricate carvings of animals above the doorways. Were these meant to be guardians of the tombs? We can only guess. The jagged spires of Ethlib mountain (above) are a stunning backdrop and are often photographed, along with the old railway station (far left) and the remains of the tracks (left) at Madain Saleh.

make our way back to our vehicle. On the way we pass some young men from Buraydah, about 600 kilometres away.

"We have lived in Buraydah for the last 20 years and we only heard about this place about one week ago," one tells me. That these enigmatic carvings have been so unrecognised for so long

is amazing, despite attempts to bring in the outside world.

Bizarrely, the site also boasts a restored railway station. This is from the Hejaz Railway built by the Ottomans in the early 20th century. But walk a few metres from the station and the tracks disappear into the sand. The railway barely lasted 50 years. Barbara Toy, the intrepid British traveller, passed through here in the 1960s retracing old incense trade routes. She wrote: "One senses that Madain Saleh is preparing to be discovered." More than 40 years later, it's still waiting. ■

PHOTOS: CHRIS WRIGHT; ALAMY; CORBIS; CHRIS WRIGHT