

"The King's Highway"



Lining both sides of this approximately 210 mile long thoroughfare is a rich chain of archaeological sites that reads like an index of ancient history and biblical towns from the kingdoms of Ammon, Moab and Edom, Crusader castles, temples, two major Roman fortresses, early Islamic towns, and the rock-cut Nabataean capital of Petra.

First mentioned by name in the Bible (Numbers 20:17 and 21:22), the King's Highway was the route that Moses wished to follow as he led his people north through the land of Edom, which is in southern Jordan. The name may, however, derive

from the even earlier episode recounted in Genesis 14, when an alliance of "4 kings from the north" marched their troops along this route to do battle against the 5 kings of the Cities of the Plain, including the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. The invading monarchs captured Lot, Abraham's nephew, before retreating, only to be chased and overpowered near Damascus by Abraham, who rescued Lot before continuing his mission. This happened around 5000 years ago.

The best way to explore the Kings' Highway today is to rent a car in Amman or Aqaba. From Amman, the King's Highway winds southwards through the lush wheat lands of the biblical kingdom of the Ammonites. You will pass Mount Nebo, from where Moses viewed the Holy Land. Half an hour south is the hilltop Herodian fortress of Machaerus (Al-Mashnaqah, or "The Gallows," in Arabic), where Herod Antipas imprisoned and beheaded John the Baptist.

The Kings' Highway then winds through the picturesque, shallow Wadi Wala valley, then plunges 600 meters into Jordan's miniature Grand Canyon, the Wadi Mujib (the Arnon of the Bible). The road reemerges on the south bank of the Mujib onto the plateau of the ancient Moabite kingdom, passing near the Nabataean temple at El-Qaser and the Roman temple/Byzantine church complex at Rabba. To the south is the massive Crusader fortress at Kerak, built in 1136 and retaken by the Arab forces of Salahuddin Al-Ayyoubi in 1189..

South of Kerak, the road winds through Mu'ta and Mazar, major Islamic shrines at the site of the first clash between the armies of Islam and Byzantium in 632 AD.. It then enters the ancient kingdom of Edom, with its excavated capital at Buseira (biblical Bozra). To the south is the Crusader fortress at Shobak, built by Baldwin I in 1115 as a key link in the Crusader outposts that guarded the lands between Jerusalem and Aqaba. The next major stop on the King's Highway is the unique rock-cut Nabataean capital city at Petra, fulcrum of the ancient world's spice and incense routes for 400 years. Before reaching the warm resort of Aqaba with its Mamluk castle, Islamic-Byzantine towns, and one on the world's oldest known churches.

Many of the landmarks mentioned in the itinerary of the "Kings Highway" journey were also places of recent history as they were used as fulcrum points in the WWI conquests of T.E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia). It also extends to the north beyond the borders of Jordan, through Damascus Syria and into southern Turkey.