

# Karak:

## history and hospitality

> By Habeeb Salloum

We were on our way to Petra, the ancient and wonderful red city of the Jordanian desert. A short time after leaving Amman, we stopped and picked up a well-dressed hitchhiker - in Jordan, one is not apprehensive about people asking for rides. Unlike in many other parts of the world, there has not been a case where a driver picking up a wayfarer has been hurt. In fact, the hitchhiker quickly becomes a friend and source of useful information - most Jordanians know some English and many are even fluent.



Our new passenger Awwad Hijazin, turned out to be a Christian Arab who claimed that his ancestors originated in the Yemen. Demonstrating true Arab hospitality, Awwad was persistent, "You must stop for coffee. My home is on the outskirts of Karak. It's on your way." It was hard for us to decline his repeated insistence, but our plans called for a full day. We had said our final no, when from a high rise we spied, across a valley on the opposite hilltop, Karak, once known as Kir Moab, dominated by its castle - imposing due to its massive size. Awwad refused to leave until he had taken us for a tour of his historic town - once the chief city of biblical Moab and later the capital of a Crusader state. During the Crusades its citadel, located on the rim of a plateau 1,100 m (3,608 ft) above sea level,

was one in their great chain of fortresses. It is chiefly remembered for its notoriously cruel Crusader lord, Renaud de Chatillon, who, was beheaded by Saladin after the Muslim victory at the Battle of Hittin in 1187 because he broke a truce.

While from a distance the fortress, whose foundation was laid in 650 B.C. looked impressive, the inside turned out to be a heap of ruins. However, it is presently in the process of being renovated. We enjoyed the grand view from its walls, then left on Highway 35 south, making our way on a winding road through hilly farmland. On and on we wound our way over what is called the 'King's Highway' which once ran from Babylon to Egypt. Soon we were driving through barren hills with hardly a dwelling or human in sight - only shepherds tending their

flocks of goats or camels. Houses and spots of greenery only appeared a short distance before Tafila, a quite large, neat and, above all, clean town where we stopped for tea.

As we left Tafila for Petra I reflected on how Jordan had been able to clean up its cities and countryside. What amazes first-time visitors to the country are the virtually litter-free cities and even smaller towns like Tafila - cleaner than most urban centres in Europe and North America. Once when I remarked on the absence of garbage on the streets, a Jordanian acquaintance said, "It's His Majesty! Our former king wanted this country to be clean and spotless, appealing to visitors." The people must have taken their sovereign's wish to heart. Jordan appears to be one of the cleanest countries in the world. ■