



Taking A Detour

In the wide spectrum of conventional trips that local tour operators have to offer visitors, one company is trying to inject a little more adventure into the Jordanian experience. **Naseem Tarawnah** talks to **Jad Asfour**, founder of Detours.

When one thinks of Jordan as a vacation destination, its most glaring sites of attraction immediately come to mind. From the hidden treasure that is Petra and the ancient Roman ruins of Jerash to floating on the waters of the Dead Sea, the posters that hang from the walls of travel agencies around the world are the Kingdom's most common and conventional marketable sites. While from a marketing perspective these will likely continue to be Jordan's most valuable assets, the dependence on these sites has also meant that tourists often miss out on the little things in between. From having dinner with a Bedouin family in the middle of the Wadi Rum desert and to long walks through the winding back alleys of Amman's downtown to hiking through the tricky terrain of Wadi Hasa just to bathe in its hidden waterfalls, the extent of what the Kingdom has to offer is something few tourists are actually exposed to.

Enter Jad Asfour, one young Jordanian entrepreneur who aims to bridge the exposure gap and put a different spin on conventional tours. A graduate of Brown University in the US, Asfour's passion for Jordan evolved naturally throughout his youth and was driven primarily by his mother, who helped make sure he was exposed to every inch of the Kingdom from an early age. Asfour, who came to be known as "Jordanian Jad" during his years at Brown, came ▶▶

▶ back to Jordan in 2005 and worked for several local tour operators, gaining a better understanding of how such businesses worked. It did not take him long to discover that most operators offered the same cookie-cutter tours, and that it was perhaps time to show tourists a different side to the Kingdom.

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Jordan Business sat down with Asfour to find out what his company, Detours, has to offer tourists, and how he has managed to build the start-up in the context of the country’s tourism industry.

Q How does Detours differ from any other local tour guide operator business? What are the services that you have to offer that no one else does?

A Jordan is a small country that is jam packed with so many incredible sites. Ranging from the historical, natural, biblical and geological, we have it all. People sometimes do not realize how unique Jordan is on so many levels. The slogans are endless. From the lowest point on earth and the baptismal site of Jesus Christ to the burial place of Moses, the home of the Great Rift Valley and the oldest geographic mosaic in art history. Yet, all guests typically want to see are Jerash, Petra and the Dead Sea. However, what is offered in between these historic sites is what separates Detours from the rest of the pack.

I have been fortunate to have followed my passion for hiking and climbing around the world, and I subsequently try to push these active elements in my various programs. This includes visits to Dana, Feynan, Rum and the several one-of-a-kind *wadis* that pour into the Dead Sea, such as Wadi Heidan, Ibin Hammad and Al Hasa. I also offer special “detours” that no other operator in Jordan does, at least not the way that I do, such as five days of hik-

ing and camping along the trail of an ancient Bedouin route from Dana to Petra, where even mobile reception is absent (though we keep a satellite phone on hand for emergencies). In fact, one of our hikes was recently featured in *National Geographic’s* 15 of the world’s best hikes.

Q What is the range of personal detours offered and how popular have you found them to be?

A When it comes to offering customized detours, our personalization team stands out. Our policy is to make sure that each guest feels that this is their own customized vacation and not a trip forced upon them by a travel agent, which was cooked up a decade ago by someone sitting behind a desk. Such tours are defined by a pre-arranged and inflexible path that tourists are forced to follow. This is where Detours comes in, offering personalized routes that are set by the tourist rather than the operator. Typically, potential guests get an idea of what the country has to offer through our website, which provides information and photos of everything Jordan, and also contains several of our own suggested detours that guests can browse and select. After some research by the guest, we receive an email with their sites of interest, budget, accommodation preferences and the preferred theme of the vacation, such as family, active or relaxed. This is where our personalization team goes to work, constructing a program around what the guest wants to experience.

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Q What are some of the obstacles or difficulties when it comes to establishing a business like Detours, and how have you dealt with those problems?

A Just like setting up any business anywhere in the world, including in Jordan,

a lot of time, planning and most of all patience are needed. We tend to deal with the arising obstacles by being generous with date projections and deadlines so as not to get discouraged. As is the case in any developing country, dealing with red tape and bureaucracy is a necessary step in a successful start-up. Having people with experience in such matters is always a plus, and one should not hesitate to seek the advice and expertise of family and friends. Since tourism is a major attraction of foreign revenue in Jordan, setting up companies such as Detours is usually encouraged, and we are lucky that our tourism policies in Jordan realize this fact.

Q What have you found to be the most popular “detours” amongst tourists?

A The most popular detours are the ones created by the guests themselves. In an era when the Internet has made people experts overnight on almost anything by offering them endless information at the tips of their fingers, the feeling of “do it yourself” has never been stronger and more rewarding for consumers. It is my job to make sure this feeling is at the core of every detour we help arrange. It is time to give people back the freedom and flexibility that define their vacations and try and abolish the operator’s pre-determined perception of what they think would be the best vacation for the typical tourist. We are here to guide, suggest, advise and provide, and based on this policy, we see the most popular detours as simply being our guest’s own detour.

Q How affordable are your packages comparatively? Are local costs, such as goods, services and entrance fees, an obstacle to your pricing strategy?

A Due to the flexibility we offer our guests, our prices fit the needs of most travelers. Whether it is a backpacker or a seeker of luxury, we have a price bracket that simply fits every mold. That said, there are several variables that tend ▶▶

▶ to affect our pricing. I must admit that one of the biggest obstacles lies with Jordanian hotels being not keen on supporting new businesses they are unfamiliar with. They are heavily dependent on long established tour operators and cannot see the value that comes with encouraging start-ups and the yielded benefit they will gain in the long run. One prominent Dead Sea hotel, for example, offered lower prices on their website than what they offered me, making it incredibly difficult for me to send business their way, which is why I have stopped dealing with them entirely. However, because I have been in the tourism business for around seven years now, I consider myself lucky to have established contacts that provide me the best rates for the most popular hotels that my guests can choose from.

When it comes to entrance fees, they tend to only be an obstacle at one specific site, Petra. Unfortunately, it is the most popular site in Jordan, and yet \$70 for a one-day entrance to the ancient city is quite outrageous, in my opinion.

Q Describe your marketing strategy? Who do you target and how do you target them?

A In my experience, business-to-business tends to be boring and involves sales calls to other tour operators that I could potentially represent in Jordan. Instead, we tend to focus on business-to-consumer business for our marketing needs. The Internet is overrun with travel websites advertising the latest tours and trips to Jordan, and so it is

In this context, I have found the power of referrals to be the most beneficial element to my business. However, to gain a referral, one needs to continuously provide the best possible product, and this forces me to keep my services in line with the best standards possible. Last year, I had one satisfied customer from Dubai who has since sent me business from the UK, Canada and Australia. This case alone has taught me to never underestimate the power of referrals. Meanwhile, recommendations through social media have also become essential in this regard.

Q Did you feel the impact of the slump in regional tourism last year, or has it been business as usual? How have you managed to deal with it?

A Anyone working in tourism felt the slump in 2011, which was one of the toughest years to sell Jordan as a destination, especially to visitors from Europe and the US. That said, the market in Jordan is accustomed to such downturns and has grown relatively resilient. For instance, the terrorist attacks of 9/11, 2001, saw a major slump, followed by a boom until the Amman bombings of November 2005. After that slump, we hit another boom until the advent of the Arab Spring. When coupled with the 2008 financial crisis that continues to cripple much of the world today, it looks like our industry is in for some tough times. However, by shifting your audience focus a little, it is more than possible to stay afloat and profitable in these troubled

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essential to have some sort of presence on some of the main sites like TripAdvisor. If a satisfied customer recommends your services on one of these sites, then you are on the right track. Online travel magazines are also places where we aim to have a presence.

times. For instance, expats across the Gulf are one group we have been targeting more lately. Now is also a good time to shift focus to the east instead of the west, and thus focus on emerging markets such as India and southeast Asian countries.



Jad Asfour

Q What are your plans for the next two years? What services do you hope to introduce in the near future?

A With such volatility at our doorstep, it is tough to plan too far ahead. A part of my strategy is to hunker down and weather the current storm in order to emerge stronger and with a lot more experience. Most international tour operators that sell Jordan are now looking towards 2013 to reintroduce the destination as a viable option. This means I will need to focus much more on targeting individuals for direct business in the long run. As for the short run, I am working on expanding my social media presence and coming up with new and innovative ways to encourage travelers to come to Jordan through the power of the web. However, my hope remains that essential tourism suppliers in Jordan, such as hotels and transportation companies, realize the necessity to keep their rates under control during these tough times in order for the entire industry to benefit mutually. ■