

The Arch

By Sophia Bitner

My family takes a lot of road trips. Most of them take us somewhere exciting, even exotic. So, when my parents announced we were going to Jordan, I had mixed feelings. I had been there twice before, so alongside delightful memories of staying in a resort in Aqaba and snorkeling in the Red sea, I also recalled the terrifying donkey ride up the steep mountains of Petra; I have a total phobia of heights. Still, I pictured myself lounging by the pool with a freshly squeezed lemonade in hand, and a cute little umbrella stuck in a pineapple on the rim, ready for a new adventure.

However, this time we didn't pull into a nice hotel at the end of the long drive. This time we pulled into a dirt parking lot...surrounded by red sand... in the middle of the desert. The only other vehicles in sight were barely held together trucks with colorfully patterned tarps over each one...and snowboards attached to back. Snow Boards?! Didn't anyone realize it was over 100 degrees outside!

A turbaned man called out in Arabic and then he and my father exchanged some words. The man invited us into one of the jeeps. Maybe we couldn't drive our car through the sand? Hesitantly, I climbed into the back of the truck with my family. We drove deep into the desert, passing goats, sand, dirt, rocks, more goats, more sand, more dirt and more rocks. Our guide pointed out one particular arch, saying later on we'd climb up to the top of it. A sinking feeling filled the pit of my stomach as I craned my neck to look up at the top of the arch. I couldn't help thinking that I just wouldn't be able to scale it.

After what seemed like hours of bumping around in the back of his truck, we arrived at what looked sort of like a campsite. There were Bedouin tents, a small courtyard made of ...you

guessed it... sand, dirt and rocks, and filled with ... goats. Our guide told everyone to get out of the truck and then he showed us to our tent.

The next morning the sand dunes were covered in a misty fog and a ferocious wind whipped my hair. The previous day had been scorching hot but today I longed for that heat. No matter how many layers I put on, I couldn't blot out the cold. We drove across the barren desert with sand and wind in our eyes. When we got back to camp for lunch I was ready to go home. I was covered in sand, bleary eyed from the wind, longing for real food, desperate for a shower, and dreading the climb up the arch. This was definitely outside my comfort zone.

Later that evening, our guide invited us up a cliff close to camp to watch the sunset. I hesitated due to the steepness of the cliff, but there were several stops on the way up, so I swallowed my fear and began the ascent. A familiar lightheadedness engulfed me and I doubted my decision to join the others on the cliff. And then I saw the stars. I had never seen so many stars in my life. I could actually see the Milky Way. In that moment, my angst subsided enough for me to realize that this was an amazing place, the opportunity of a lifetime.

The next morning, we set out for the arch. When I saw it, my stomach lurched. Could I really do this? With the wonder of the stars still burned into my mind, I grasped at a small shred of courage and set off up the arch. My throat was dry, as much from fear as from the desert. Putting one trembling foot in front of the other, I climbed. Nearly at the top, I looked down and became paralyzed with fear. Our Bedouin guide called out, "You can do it, Habibi!" Taking the final steps, I reached the top and eased out onto the arch. In the middle of the bridge I stopped and looked out at Wadi Rum. In that instant I saw what I hadn't before. The sand was a deep red, formed into amazing dunes. The rocks were wind shaped into incredible sculptures and

formations. Little patches of green popped up out of the dirt, revealing hidden springs, where adorable baby goats grazed. And I was filled with newfound confidence. Although I can't say that my fear of heights was extinguished, I found enough courage to master the arch and expose myself to something new and wonderful. On my descent, I was on fire; I could achieve anything.

The final day, we drove the truck up to one of the sand dunes. It was massive. I took off my shoes and felt the sand between my toes. Slipping and sliding, I hiked up the dune, full of confidence. Curiously, our guide followed with the snowboard. The guide strapped me on and I got to experience one of the greatest thrills of my life- zipping down the red sand dunes on a snow board, in the middle of the desert of Wadi Rum.

Mastering my fear on that arch changed the way that I approach and deal with difficult situations. Whenever I face adversity or have to enter the unknown, I look up and master the arch again and again. Changing schools once more, dealing with a difficult friend, learning a new language, or moving to an unfamiliar place; all I have to do is remember the arch and how my own internal view had changed on top. With that feeling in mind, I can do anything. There is an entire world out there for me to explore, just beyond my comfort zone.