

# THERE IS *freedom* IN THE DESERT

A precarious crossing into Israel is a worthy entrance to the Wadi Rum Electro music festival that is a true display of the power of music and it's ability to bring people together, as Franziska Knupper discovers.

Photography **Hussein Amri**



caption



Caption



Caption

**W**hat do you want in Jordan?" I'm asked as I attempt to cross the border into Israel. "Climbing and hiking," I answer, trying not to blink or look suspicious. The border patrol looks at me with apprehension.

"Maybe a jeep tour, as well," I hear myself say. I am starting to sweat. The border from Israel to Jordan closes in ten minutes and I have made it all the way from Tel Aviv in time, so I have no intention of giving up now. I was told by Shadi Khries, electronic producer and one of the headliners of the SA7RA-OUI festival, to say as little as possible. No location, no names. The organisers want to stay under the radar.

I'm here to attend the SA7RA-OUI in Wadi Rum, a music festival, I'm told, that's very different to the others. Hosted by local Bedouins, organised by a French production company and Jordanians from Amman, and attended by Palestinians, Israelis, Jordanians, French and Germans alike, the event embodies the bridging power inherent in music. As Shadi puts it simply, "The desert gives freedom.

a set of front teeth slightly stained by tobacco and Arabic black coffee. "This is our land," he says, and he is not wrong. Bedouins make up 40 percent of the Jordanian population and have inhabited these dusty plains for around 500 years. Next to the dance floor, men are lighting a bonfire, and preparing coffee and tea for the newcomers. Hospitality is a crucial part of their identity, not a question of education: "We just continue our tradition – receiving strangers and wanderers of the desert, giving them shelter and food," says Mohammad.

For years, Shadi has been friends with the Bedouins from the village. "We agreed that we have to break down all barriers," he says in his quiet yet penetrating voice. "You have to be very careful, respect the place and find common energy with the people living here. It cannot be about girls, mingling and cocktails,

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"We listen to what we want, we dance how we want, and we wear what we want." In this dried-up riverbed, the Wadi Rum, all rules are different. Red rocks of sandstone and granite seem to rise randomly into the sky, reaching up to 800 metres high. "We call it The Valley of the Moon," says Mohammad, one of the hosts from the local Bedouin clan. Dressed all in white with a traditional red *keffiyeh* – a checked piece of cloth tied with a black cord around the head – he greets the first guests. Some arrive at nightfall by Jeep, their beaming headlights a beacon in the darkness, moving through the desert valley like a distant torch procession.

Mohammad shakes hands, a cigarette seemingly glued to the corner of his mouth. When he laughs – which he does often – he reveals

but only about the music." This time, he's invited Paris-based duo Acid Arab to be the night's highlight. Members Guido Minisky and Hervé Carvalho interweave Middle Eastern strings, percussion and Arabic scales into the framework of electronic music, allowing instruments such as Rebab, Oud or Qanbus to dive deep into the fabric of the West's club sound. And whenever they hit a familiar Jordanian tune and twist the knob in the right direction, Bedouins begin jumping from the rocks into the middle of the dance floor, taking each other and the foreigners by the hands and moving to the beat in ecstasy.

"What an interesting experience dancing in such a crowd," says Simon, one of the attendees, this expression a mixture of excitement and astonishment.



Caption

# FESTIVAL



Caption



Caption

As the only Jewish guest from Israel, he rarely finds himself having fun with his Arab neighbours. "But this is the next step, this is transcendence," he says before I see his big afro disappear through the crowd. Next to him, Spiro and Daniel from Bethlehem are shaking their dreadlocks. Their hearts belong to trance music, but they confess it's a somewhat elusive love, "A trance or an electronic scene is almost non-existent in Palestine. You have to look for it," one says. According to them, Arab countries of the Middle East are still in their infancy when it comes to contemporary electronic music. On the other hand, this is why festivals are still authentic, dedicated spaces for the true counterculture and the outcasts. Especially for musicians, bookers and producers from the underground scene in the West Bank and Gaza who have a hard time expressing their art and building a crowd. They lack funding, freedom of movement and visas to go abroad, making it hard to pursue an international music career. As a result, many bands have their fanbase in places they can never visit while their compositions travel across oceans to places like Paris, Brussels or Berlin. In the Middle East,

however, music is a matter charged with politics and every line-up is a statement.

"If you want to listen to Acid Arab and dance without an intervention, you are forced to retreat to such remote areas," explains Shadi. After the festival, he will leave immediately for Paris. Only the desert can seem to keep him a few days in his home country. "There is freedom in the desert. We have to charge this area with new energy."

With these words in mind, I gather my belongings the next morning and shake the red dust out from my hair, shoes, and bags. Some guests have moved their mattresses to the higher rocks to wake up with the sunrise. Slowly, the light creeps up from behind the mountains. In the distance, a girl pulls her yellow suitcase over a sand dune.

Two jeep rides, one traffic jam and three police checks later, I am once again facing the border. The Israeli official looks at me and I do not blink. He asks me if I have any Arab friends. "No, sir." And if I have visited any Arabs. "No, of course not." What did I do in Jordan? "Climbing and hiking," I say with a smile. "Climbing and hiking." ☒

## GET PLANNING



### GET THERE

Qatar Airways and Royal Jordanian fly to Aqaba via Doha and Amman from AU\$1300 return. From there, you can catch a taxi, or organise a private guide or tour to get to Wadi Rum National Park. [qatarairways.com](http://qatarairways.com)  
[rj.com](http://rj.com)



### STAY THERE

If you like it a bit more luxurious, make sure to stay at Beit Ali Lodge where you'll sleep in traditional Bedouin tented areas and have access to a restaurant, bar and desert swimming pool [www.baitali.com](http://www.baitali.com)

For more authenticity and bonfire jams with the locals, you can stay at the Wadi Rum Sunrise Camp just seven kilometres from the village where you'll have the choice of sleeping in tents, beside the fire or on a sand dune under the stars.

[www.wadirumdesert.com](http://www.wadirumdesert.com)



### TOUR THERE

Jeep tours, camel rides, rock climbing trips and hiking tours can be booked individually from the tourist information point at the entrance of the park or at a later point at one of the Bedouin camps inside the park.



### GET INFORMED

The Wadi Rum Electro Festival is a cultural and music festival organised in collaboration with Bedouins to share their music and culture. The location of the event changes each year.

A one-month tourist visa is required for visits to Jordan, and can be arranged on arrival at airports.

[wadirum.jo](http://wadirum.jo)

