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Jordan

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Introduction

Jordan, officially known as the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, stands at the crossroads of history, geography, and culture in the heart of the Middle East. Bordered by ancient lands and modern conflicts alike, this small but resilient nation has long played a pivotal role in the narrative of the region. From the prehistoric settlements of human ancestors along its river valleys to the echoes of empires that have risen and fallen on its soil, Jordan is a country imbued with the legacies of millennia.

Despite achieving independence only in the mid-20th century, Jordan's roots stretch deep into antiquity. The kingdoms of Ammon, Moab, and Edom once vied for survival and prosperity here, while the fabled city of Petra—carved from the rose-red desert cliffs by the Nabataeans—remains one of humanity's architectural marvels. Through centuries of Roman, Byzantine, Islamic, and Ottoman rule, Jordan's land absorbed a mosaic of influences, creating a tapestry of heritage that endures to this day.

Modern Jordan is defined not just by its ancient treasures, but by its people and their remarkable spirit of hospitality. The Jordanian identity is shaped by a distinctive blend of Arab customs, Islamic traditions, and openness to the many communities—both indigenous and displaced—that have found refuge within its borders. Continuous waves of migration and the influx of refugees from neighboring conflicts have challenged Jordan's stability, yet have enriched its society, making its demographics among the most diverse in the Arab world.

In this book, we explore Jordan in all its facets: the harsh beauty of its desert landscapes, the vibrant life of Amman's streets, and the deep cultural traditions that frame Jordanian daily life. We delve into the economy and the daunting issues of water scarcity, unemployment, and ongoing political reform. We trace the arc of Jordan's history—both ancient and modern—and examine how its leaders and citizens navigate the complex realities of the twenty-first century, balancing tradition and change within a region marked by volatility and hope.

For travelers, students, and anyone seeking to understand the wider Middle East, Jordan offers an accessible entry point—a country of enduring peace in a turbulent neighborhood, famous for its archaeological wonders, cultural riches, and the legendary warmth of its people. Whether standing atop Mount Nebo, floating in the Dead Sea, or sharing stories in a Bedouin tent beneath a canopy of stars, Jordan's story is both timeless and urgently relevant today.

“Jordan: Portrait of a Country” opens a window onto a land where past and present converge, illuminating the resilience, beauty, and complexity of a nation at the heart

of the Arab world.

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CHAPTER ONE: A Land of Contrasts - Geography and Environment

Jordan, officially the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, is a nation of remarkable geographical diversity, a testament to its location at the nexus of continents and geological forces. Often described as a semi-arid country, its landscapes range from the fertile green uplands of the west to the vast, sculpted expanses of the eastern desert, with the dramatic Jordan Rift Valley slicing through its heart. Covering an area of 89,342 square kilometers (34,495 sq mi), Jordan is relatively small on the world stage, yet it packs an immense variety of environments within its borders.

More than half of Jordan's territory is consumed by the Arabian Desert, particularly in its eastern and southern reaches. This isn't a monolithic stretch of sand dunes, however. The northern part of this desert expanse is characterized by volcanic lava and basalt formations, a stark, dark terrain that speaks of ancient eruptions. Moving south, the landscape transforms into sandstone and granite outcrops, where the relentless forces of wind and erosion have carved intricate patterns into the rock, creating a truly otherworldly vista. This is the realm of the Bedouin, of endless skies and horizons, a place that embodies both harshness and a profound, stark beauty.

The country is broadly divided into three major physiographic regions, each with its own distinct character. The first, as mentioned, is the desert. This expansive area, largely part of the greater Syrian Desert, dominates the country's eastern and southern sectors. It's a land of extremes, where temperatures can soar during the day and plummet at night, and where life clings to scarce water sources. Despite its aridity, the desert is far from barren, supporting unique flora and fauna adapted to its challenging conditions, and holding within its embrace some of Jordan's most iconic natural attractions.

To the west of this vast desert, the land gradually rises into the second major region: the uplands east of the Jordan River. These highlands are the agricultural heartland of Jordan, receiving significantly more rainfall than the desert. Here, the landscape is characterized by rolling hills, valleys, and fertile plains, where olive groves and wheat fields thrive. This region is also home to many of Jordan's major cities, including the capital, Amman, reflecting its greater habitability and historical significance as a crossroads for trade and settlement.

The third, and perhaps most defining, geographical feature is the Jordan Valley. This dramatic rift, part of the larger Afro-Arabian Rift System, forms a significant portion of Jordan's western border, shared with Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories. It

is a place of geological marvels, most notably containing the Dead Sea, the lowest point on Earth. The Jordan Valley is a verdant strip, especially along the Jordan River itself, where the life-giving waters support agriculture and a more temperate climate than the surrounding desert and uplands.

Jordan's climate, though generally arid, is heavily influenced by the proximity of the Mediterranean Sea, particularly in the west. This influence grants the country a climate that varies from Mediterranean in the west to more extreme desert conditions in the east and south. Summers are typically warm and dry, while winters are mild and, crucially, wet, bringing the majority of the year's precipitation. Continental air masses also play a role, as does elevation, leading to considerable regional variations in temperature and rainfall.

In Amman, located in the northern uplands, average monthly temperatures pleasantly fluctuate between 8°C (46°F) in the winter months and 26°C (78°F) during the height of summer. This allows for comfortable living for much of the year, although summer days can certainly be hot. Further south, in the Red Sea port city of Aqaba, the climate is considerably warmer, reflecting its desert coastal location. Here, average monthly temperatures range from a mild 16°C (60°F) in winter to a scorching 33°C (91°F) in the summer, making Aqaba a popular winter sun destination.

Precipitation is a precious commodity in Jordan, and it falls predominantly during the short, cool winter months. The amount of rainfall decreases dramatically as one moves from the northwest towards the south and east. Near the Jordan River in the northwest, annual precipitation can reach around 400 mm (16 inches), supporting a more Mediterranean type of vegetation. However, this rapidly dwindles to less than 100 mm (4 inches) annually in the deep south, where desert conditions prevail.

The uplands east of the Jordan River, while more fertile than the desert, still receive a modest average of around 355 mm (14 inches) of rainfall annually. The Jordan Valley itself, despite its relative lushness, averages only about 200 mm (8 inches) per year, relying heavily on the river for irrigation. The vast desert regions, predictably, receive even less, sometimes experiencing years with virtually no measurable rainfall. While rare, occasional snow and frost can occur in the higher elevations of the uplands during winter, offering a picturesque, albeit fleeting, contrast to the predominantly arid landscape. These climatic patterns underscore the critical challenge Jordan faces: water scarcity. With a growing population, managing this precious resource remains a paramount concern for the nation's future.

Beyond the Dead Sea, which holds the distinction of being the lowest point on Earth at 408 meters below sea level, Jordan's topography also boasts impressive peaks. The highest point in the country is Jebel Umm El Dami, soaring to an elevation of 1,854 meters (6,083 feet) above sea level. Located in the dramatic southern desert landscape of Wadi Rum, this peak offers breathtaking panoramic views of the

surrounding sandstone mountains and valleys, a fitting high point in a land of such striking geographical contrasts.

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