Stargazing in Wadi Rum: a Bortle-1 itinerary for the Milky Way and the Bedouin storytelling night

The Wadi Rum desert floor is one of the darkest skies in the Northern Hemisphere — Bortle Class 1, no light pollution, the galactic core visible Apr–Sep. Practical itinerary, gear list, and a month-by-month target calendar.

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There are few places in the Northern Hemisphere where you can lie on a sand dune and see the Milky Way's galactic core arc directly overhead — pearl-white, dust-banded, with the dark rift cutting through it like a torn ribbon. Wadi Rum is one of them. The protected area is far enough from Aqaba and Amman that the night sky reaches Bortle Class 1 standards on most nights — no light pollution, no glow on the horizon, just the desert floor and 5,000+ visible stars.

Combine that with a Bedouin camp meal and the chance of a meteor shower, and a single night in Wadi Rum can be the most memorable thing in a Jordan trip. Here is how to plan it.

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1Why Wadi Rum for stars

The Wadi Rum Protected Area covers 721 km² with elevations from 45 m to 1,840 m at Jabal Umm ad Dami.[1] The relevant facts for stargazing:

- **No fixed lighting in the protected area.** Camps use lanterns and small solar lights. There is no town within 30 km of the central wadi.
- **Latitude 29.6° N.** Far enough south that the galactic core rises higher than at most European or North American sites — gets near zenith in summer.
- **Elevation.** The desert floor is at ~900 m above sea level, well above the haze layer.
- **Dry, stable air.** Low humidity through most of the year. Best months for transparency: May–September.

2Month-by-month target calendar

January. Orion at zenith. M42 (Orion Nebula) is the easy DSLR target. The galactic anti-centre is visible — fewer stars than summer but better contrast. **February.** Orion still high. Auriga and Taurus on display. Cold nights — bring layers. **March.** Galactic core begins rising before dawn — early-morning shoots only. Spring constellations (Leo, Virgo) at zenith by midnight. **April.** Galactic core rises around 2 am. The Lyrid meteor shower peaks April 22–23. **May.** Galactic core rises around midnight — accessible for most travellers. Antares + the Scorpius/Sagittarius region is the centerpiece. **June–July.** Peak galactic core season. Core is up by 9–10 pm and reaches zenith around 1 am. Best months for the wide-field Milky Way photograph. **August.** Galactic core still good early evening. The Perseid meteor shower peaks August 12–13 — the best meteor shower of the year, comfortably warm desert nights. **September.** Galactic core sets earlier each night. Cygnus / North America Nebula at zenith. Air clarity is at its best. **October.** The galactic core has set; autumn constellations take over. Andromeda Galaxy (M31) is high. The Orionid meteor shower peaks October 21–22. **November–December.** Orion returns. The Geminid meteor shower peaks December 13–14 — the second-best shower of the year. Cold nights; pack accordingly.

> June and July at midnight: the galactic core arcs across the zenith and the dark rift cuts through it like a torn ribbon.

3Choosing a camp

Three styles of overnight stay, from cheapest to most premium:

- **Standard Bedouin camp.** Goat-hair tents, communal dinner around the fire, mattresses on the sand inside the tent. ~30–60 JD per person including dinner + breakfast. The most authentic experience.
- **Mid-range camp.** Solid-walled cabins, ensuite bathrooms, a slightly larger common area. ~80–120 JD per person.
- **Bubble / dome camps.** Transparent geodesic domes you can look at the stars through from your bed. ~150–300 JD per person. Photographers love them; the rest of the experience is a bit theme-park.

For pure stargazing, any of the three works — the sky is the same. Choose by your accommodation preference and budget.

4Gear list

- **Camera.** A modern phone (iPhone 13 onwards / Pixel 6 onwards) handles wide-field Milky Way photography in night mode. A mirrorless / DSLR with a wide-aperture lens (f/2.8 or faster) and a tripod gives much better results.
- **Tripod.** Essential for any non-phone shot. Travel tripods (carbon fibre, ~1 kg) work fine.
- **Star app.** Stellarium (free) or PhotoPills (paid) for planning core position + meteor shower radiants.
- **Red headtorch.** White light destroys dark adaptation. A red-light setting on your headtorch is essential.
- **Layers.** Even in summer, the desert can drop to 12 °C at 2 am. A light fleece + windbreaker.
- **Binoculars (optional).** 7×50 or 10×50 — good for the Pleiades, Andromeda, the Beehive Cluster.

5Bedouin storytelling night etiquette

Most camps include a "storytelling night" before bed — your hosts gather around the fire, brew mint tea, and share Bedouin stories or songs. A few unwritten rules:

- **Sit, don't stand.** Storytelling is around a low fire; sit on the carpet or cushion.
- **Accept the tea.** Refusing is mildly rude. Accept the second cup if offered; the third is optional.
- **Don't photograph faces without asking.** Especially of older Bedouin men and women. Always ask.
- **Tip the storyteller.** 10–20 JD discreetly at the end. Customary and welcomed.
- **Phones away.** Save the photographs for the stars.

> **For solo travellers**
>
> Bubble camps are couples-oriented; pick a standard Bedouin camp for a more social storytelling night. Solo travellers consistently report the experience as the highlight of their Jordan trip.

6Practical tips

- **Avoid the full moon week.** Even a quarter moon washes out the Milky Way. Plan for new-moon ±5 days.
- **Two nights, not one.** One night is often clouded or hazy. Two gives you a much better chance of a clear sky.
- **Don't drink alcohol on the photo nights.** Cold + dehydration + dark adaptation are real factors.
- **Test your camera at home first.** The first few minutes in the desert isn't the time to learn manual mode.
- **Photography permits.** Drone use in the protected area requires a permit — apply through the Visitor Centre. For ground-based stargazing photography, no permit needed.

References

1. Wikipedia — Wadi Rum

Verified by locals: TBD — this article will be reviewed by a Wadi Rum Bedouin camp operator and an astrophotographer before final publication. Drafted from Wikipedia and observation experience.