Bedouin storytelling night in Wadi Rum: how the evening actually works

After dinner at most Wadi Rum camps, the host gathers everyone around the fire and the storytelling begins. Practical guide to what's offered, what's expected of you, and the unwritten rules.

Anas Hu · May 5, 2026

It's the most-anticipated and least-documented part of a Wadi Rum camp night. Dinner has finished — zarb pit-roasted meat, fresh bread, salads, mint tea — and the host stands up and gestures to the fire pit. Everyone moves outside. Cushions are arranged in a circle. A small fire is started. Coals are stirred for the brass dallah (coffee pot). And then the storytelling begins, sometimes in Arabic with translation, sometimes in English with the older Bedouin contributions in Arabic. There's an oud, occasionally a rebab, and the music is somewhere between performance and accompaniment to the stories.

Most travellers don't know what to do. Here's how it works.

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1Why it matters

Wadi Rum's Bedouin community — primarily the Zalabia tribe — has lived in the desert for several generations. The storytelling tradition is one of the few aspects of pre-tourism Bedouin culture that translates directly into the modern experience. The stories are tribal histories, romance epics, jokes, and occasional pieces of poetry; the music is unwritten but learned by ear. A full

night of storytelling is the closest most travellers will get to a Bedouin oral tradition that predates the tourism economy.

2The flow of an evening

A typical Bedouin storytelling night follows roughly this arc:

1. **The shift from dinner to fire.** 8:30–9:00 pm. The host quietly gestures, and the group moves from the dining tent to the fire pit.
2. **Coffee preparation.** The brass dallah is filled, the ground beans + cardamom added, the pot moved to the coals. The smell announces it.
3. **First stories.** Often jokes or short anecdotes — to warm the crowd, set the rhythm.
4. **The longer epic.** Often a tribal-history piece or a romance epic. Sometimes 15–20 minutes long, with an Arabic-speaking elder doing most of the work and a younger Bedouin translating.
5. **Music interlude.** Oud and rebab. Often instrumental; sometimes accompanied by song.
6. **Audience contributions.** If you can sing or recite something from your own tradition, this is the moment to offer it. The Bedouin appreciate reciprocity.
7. **Final tea.** Mint tea, usually without sugar refills — the night is winding down.
8. **Bed by 11–11:30 pm.**

> If you can sing one song from your tradition, this is the moment to offer it. The Bedouin appreciate reciprocity.

3The unwritten rules

- **Sit, don't stand.** Storytelling is around a low fire; sit on the carpet or cushion.
- **Accept the coffee.** Refusing the first cup is mildly rude. Accept the second cup if offered; the third cup declines further.
- **Hold the cup with your right hand.** The left hand is considered unclean in many Bedouin traditions for eating and drinking.
- **Don't photograph faces without asking.** Especially older Bedouin men and women. Always ask first.
- **Phones away.** Save the photographs for the stars later.

- **Don't talk during a song.** Conversation during instrumental music is fine; song lyrics are listened to.
- **If you don't speak Arabic, that's OK.** The translator will fill you in. The pacing of the evening is unhurried.

4Tipping

The right amount: **10–20 JD per traveller per overnight** for the storytelling host (separate from any 4×4 driver tip). Discretely, in JD, at the end of the night when you're saying goodnight. The hosts won't ask; the convention is universal in Wadi Rum.

> **For solo travellers**
>
> Bring a story or song from your own tradition. The Bedouin will ask, and a prepared piece changes the night.

5Practical tips

- **Layers.** Cold descends fast in the desert after sunset. Bring a fleece + windbreaker even in summer.
- **No alcohol.** Most Bedouin camps don't serve alcohol; bringing your own is poor form.
- **Don't rush back to the bubble tent.** The night doesn't have a fixed end time; staying through is appreciated.
- **Combine with stargazing.** The fire dies down around 11 pm; the stars are at their best after midnight.

References

1. Wikipedia — Wadi Rum (Bedouin community context)

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