The Hejaz Railway ruins at Wadi Rum: Ottoman engineering, T.E. Lawrence sabotage raids, and the station that survived

Built 1900–1908 to carry pilgrims from Damascus to Medina, sabotaged by T.E. Lawrence and the Arab Revolt 1916–1918. The Wadi Rum station and several ruined sections are still on the desert floor.

Anas Hu · May 5, 2026

In 1900, the Ottoman Empire began building a railway from Damascus to Medina to carry Muslim pilgrims to the Hejaz. By 1908 the line reached Medina. By 1918 most of it was scrap metal in the desert. T.E. Lawrence, leading the Arab Revolt's southern campaign from Wadi Rum, made the Hejaz Railway one of his strategic targets. The Bedouin tribes that joined the revolt blew up bridges, derailed trains, and tied up Ottoman forces who had to repair the line constantly. The line never recovered.

The ruins are still on the Wadi Rum desert floor — a station, several sections of track, and the embankment they ran on.

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1Why visit the Hejaz Railway ruins

Wadi Rum is famous for its rock formations and Bedouin culture, but the railway ruin is the only major colonial-era industrial archaeology on the desert

floor. It's the physical evidence of a campaign that became legendary — the Arab Revolt, T.E. Lawrence's Seven Pillars of Wisdom, the Sykes-Picot inheritance — and you can stand on the rails. The ruin is included in many 4×4 tours but rarely gets the time it deserves. It's worth slowing down for.

21900–1918: built, sabotaged, abandoned

The Hejaz Railway was conceived in 1900 by Sultan Abdul Hamid II as a religious and strategic project — a 1,300 km line from Damascus to Medina, financed largely by donations from the Muslim faithful. By 1908 the rails reached Medina, with the original plan to extend to Mecca never realised. During World War I, the Ottoman military used the line to move troops south.

The Arab Revolt (1916–1918) targeted the railway as the Ottomans' supply lifeline. British officer T.E. Lawrence documented Wadi Rum during the Arab Revolt (1917–18) and used the wadi as a base for raids. The Bedouin sabotage parties — operating from camps in Wadi Rum — destroyed bridges, derailed locomotives, and forced the Ottoman garrisons to spread thin defending the line. By 1918 most of the southern sections were inoperable.[1]

3What you can see

- **The Wadi Rum station.** A small Ottoman-era station building, partially restored. The platform and the nameboard survive. It's roughly 1 km north of the modern Visitor Centre.
- **The track and embankment.** Long sections of metre-gauge rail still in place, the wooden ties largely gone. The embankment runs north-south through the wadi.
- **A locomotive replica.** A reconstructed Hejaz Railway locomotive sits on the platform — used in tourist day-events including occasional Arab Revolt re-enactments.
- **Bombed bridge fragments.** Further north, fragments of the bridges Lawrence's forces destroyed are still visible — concrete piers leaning against the wadi walls.

> The rails were laid in 1908. Lawrence's Bedouin sabotage parties pulled most of them up by 1918. The ones still in place are the ones nobody bothered to remove.

4The Lawrence connection

For travellers reading Seven Pillars of Wisdom on the trip — the rock formation visible from the Wadi Rum entrance is named after the book, though the geological feature predates Lawrence by millennia — the Hejaz Railway is the operational thread that runs through Lawrence's chapters on the Wadi Rum period. Lawrence describes the wadi as "this processional way greater than imagination." The same wadi held his camps, his Bedouin allies, and the rail line his raids targeted.

5Practical tips

- **How long.** 30–45 minutes if you slow your tour at the station; 90 minutes if you walk the embankment north toward the bombed bridges.
- **Best time of day.** Late afternoon — the Ottoman stonework warms in the slanting light.
- **Combine with.** The standard 4×4 tour passes the station; ask your guide to allow extra time. Or include it as a stop on the way to the seven pillars.
- **Photography.** The locomotive replica is the obvious photograph; the embankment running away into the desert is the better shot.
- **Reading.** Bring an excerpt of Seven Pillars of Wisdom chapters 70–80 — Lawrence on Wadi Rum and the Hejaz Railway raids. Read on-site.

References

1. Wikipedia — Wadi Rum

Verified by locals: TBD — this article will be reviewed by a Wadi Rum Visitor Centre-licensed Bedouin guide and an Arab Revolt historian before final publication. Drafted from Wikipedia.