



The Middle East

“Is it safe?” is often the first question any savvy traveler asks of travel to the Middle East. While there are certainly some countries that Americans are encouraged to avoid, there are still places and people who welcome Americans with open arms. Each traveler to the countries that follow found the citizens they encountered to be as hospitable as the citizens of Western European nations, and never experienced moments of fear. Traveling to these countries posed no specific challenges to the writers, so don’t let fear keep you from discovering the beauty of the Middle East.

○ JORDAN

Gazing across the silvery water of the Dead Sea to Jericho from the five-star Jordan Valley Marriott Resort & Spa, all is calm. Kids are shrieking in the pool, colorful drinks are being consumed by ladies wearing straw hats and pale, portly men are scorching under the bright sun on lounge chairs. If you didn’t know where you were, you might guess Florida or the Caribbean.

Jordan is the Middle East you don’t know, the stable Middle East that has quietly invested in education, healthcare and infrastructure. With a population of six million, Jordan is a longtime ally of the United States and often referred to as the “Switzerland of the Middle East.” Its savvy monarch, King Abdullah II, successfully addressed Congress in March 2007; stylish Queen Rania works to empower the region’s women. A country without oil, tourism is Jordan’s No. 1 industry and American travelers are among its top 10 arrivals, warmly welcomed.

Ancient Cities & Holy Sites

Amman is called “The White City,” and from the glass-walled Wild Jordan Café, you can see why. Skip dinner, but have a glass of wine with the young urbanites and enjoy the views. Numerous excavations of The Citadel reveal Roman, Byzantine and early Islamic remains; it towers above sprawling, modern Amman from atop Jabal al-Qala. Besides the monumental gateway, the grounds include the Jordan Archeological Museum,



PHOTO COURTESY OF JORDAN TOURISM BOARD / GEORGE FISCHER

which contains such antiquities as the Dead Sea Scrolls and sarcophagi.

The ride to the ancient city of Jerash from Amman is green and hilly, winding through pine forests and olive groves. On the way, I stop at the well-preserved Castle of Ajloun. One of the country’s most impressive examples of Arab military architecture, it was built in 1184 not to house royalty but to control iron mines and was used as a fortress for defense against the Crusaders. Located in the hills of Gilead, this Roman city — often called “Little Athens” — includes remains of Neolithic times, as well as Greek, Byzantine and Omyaad civilizations. In the bright sunlight, walking the colonnaded streets, past the ruins of temples, theaters, public squares and plazas and public baths, I can imagine it alive with activity.

Mount Nebo (also known as Mount Pisgah) is the most revered holy site in Jordan, fabled to be where

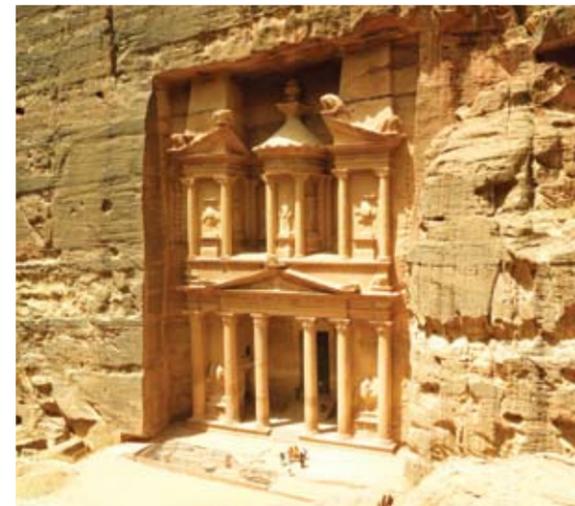


PHOTO COURTESY OF JORDAN TOURISM BOARD / GEORGE FISCHER

The Treasury in Petra

Moses saw the Promised Land. Following 60 years of excavation at the hilltop site, a basilica church with one of the most magnificent mosaic floors in the world was discovered. In contrast, the Italian artist Giovanni Fantoni’s modern serpentine cross punctuates the panoramic views across the Jordan Valley and Dead Sea to the rooftops of Jerusalem and Bethlehem.

Traveling south on the 5,000-year-old Kings Highway, an ancient trade route that stretches across the Sinai Peninsula and is mentioned in the Bible, I arrive in Petra, Jordan’s most visited attraction. Petra was the crossroads of Arabia, Egypt and Syria-Phoenicia trade and commerce, and is often referred to as the “Eighth Wonder of the World.” The Nabateans were admired for their refined culture and ingenious system of dams and water channels that are still studied today. The Treasury is the most photographed building, and was used to great effect in “Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade.” What pictures don’t show is the scale of Petra, which is massive. I spend a full day exploring the ruins, including a slot canyon that reminds me of those in Utah. I trudge up 900 steep steps to the Monastery — donkeys pick their way up the path, carrying visitors too tired or infirm to make the trek. The hike is well worth the effort: the Monastery is a spectacular tomb facade.

From Sand to Sea

Wadi Rum is the otherworldly desert landscape where “Lawrence of Arabia” was filmed. I arrive in the late afternoon, climb into a battered, dusty four-wheel drive Jeep and race to beat the sunset, bouncing over sands that segue from ocher to red. We pass a group of Bedouins who, along with their camels, are resting; several men are praying to Mecca before arriving at a private

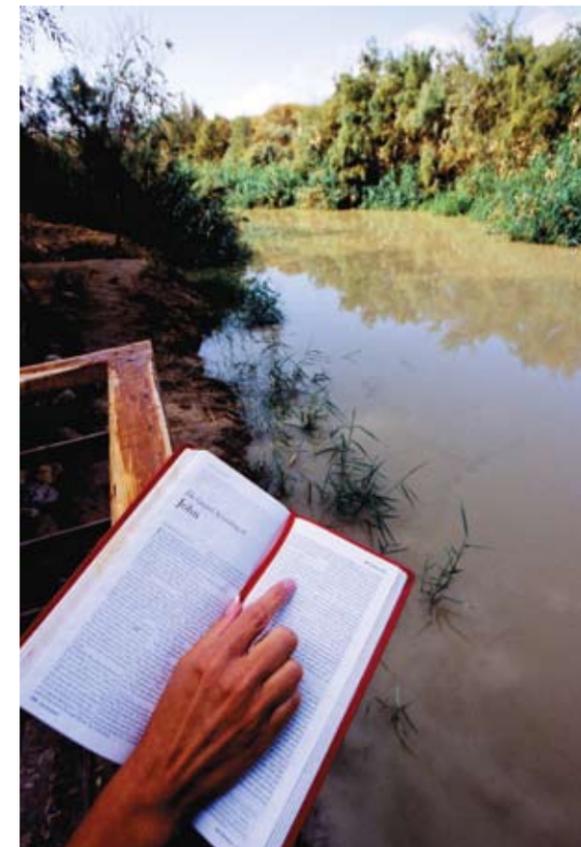


PHOTO COURTESY OF JORDAN TOURISM BOARD / STEPHEN KIRKPATRICK

camp where I will spend the night under the stars.

The camp hosts, two handsome men clad in the traditional white long robes, offer me sweet cardamom tea in welcome. I sit in front of a fire and admire the monolithic rockscapes that rise from the desert floor; it’s easy to see why Wadi Rum has been called the “valley of the moon.” Dinner is *zarb*, a whole lamb that has been cooked in the sand, *mezze* and baked bread stuffed with minced lamb; after dinner, there is singing and dancing. A full moon illuminates the camp. I take a moonlit stroll to soak up the vast silence before retiring to my “room,” a tent with a mattress, a small night table with a couple of candles and rugs.

My night in the desert is a highlight of the trip, but Aqaba, a popular year-round resort town on the Red Sea, offers a different kind of diversion. I board a boat for an afternoon of sunbathing and snorkeling in the gentle waves before checking into the grand Movenpick Resort.

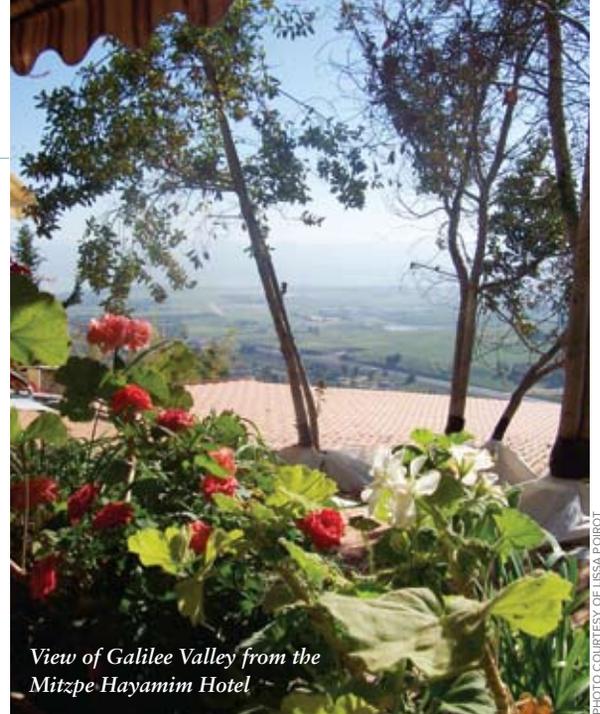
The following day, driving along the shores of the Dead Sea, the lowest point on earth at 1,371 feet below sea level and falling, my final stop is at Bethany Beyond

the Jordan, the site where John baptized Jesus. Religious tourists flock to this holy site and Jordan is spending more than \$7 million to construct a visitor's center, marketplace and memorial. The muddy river looks more like a stream; the Israel flag flaps in the wind just across the water. An armed guard sits under the wooden landing watching as I dunk a toe in. We exchange nodding glances. In the footsteps of so many religious pilgrims, it seems ironic that soldiers now walk these banks separating the two countries.

— *Suzanne Wright*

○ ISRAEL

As so often my travel adventures begin, I am sitting on a beach watching the afternoon sun sink lower before my eyes and digging my bare feet into the silky soft brown sand. In the crashing surf before me are a group of surfers catching the last waves of the day. It's an idyllic picture and one that I never thought I would be experiencing in Israel. Yes, the Holy Land. While I have come to discover its ancient history, it's on this Tel Aviv beach I sit, discovering for the first time "The Med," as it is affectionately called across the pond. Israel surprises me with its beauty, from my first day on a beach in Tel Aviv to my final day within the walls of Old Jerusalem.



View of Galilee Valley from the Mitzpe Hayamim Hotel

PHOTO COURTESY OF LISSA POIROT

Matisse, and meet new friends for dinner at the trendy old port area filled with nightclubs and fine dining. Had it not been for the Hebrew flowing from the mouths of strangers, and a welcoming wine toast — "*L'chaim!*" — I would've sworn I was sitting in a Manhattan restaurant on a Friday night. Of course, what should I expect from a city of nearly 400,000 people but a completely cosmopolitan beachside town that reminded me in look and feel of Miami, with its pale-colored International-style condos and high rises.

Waking early the next morning to sunshine and warm spring weather, we set off for the northern mountains of Western Galilee. Following the Via Mare ("Way of the Sea"), I catch glimpses of the sparkling blue Mediterranean as we climb higher and higher past gardens of reds, pinks, whites and yellows. It is spring here, and although Israel does have plenty of deserts of rock and sand, the northern portion of the state is a lush oasis of trees and flowers. Arriving at the Mitzpe Hayamim ("Sight at the Seas") Hotel in Rosh Pina, I am surrounded by perfumed fragrances from the flowers, as well as the herbs growing near the entranceway of the romantic inn nestled into the mountain and overlooking the Sea of Galilee. More than 100 rooms — no two the same in décor and style, including my own room with wrought iron, canopied bed and bathroom outfitted with a claw-foot tub — are found here, but the inside of the hotel is as lush as its outdoor surroundings and I hardly notice the other rooms or guests.

The inn is located on a working organic farm and I stroll the grounds, quiet except for the sounds of birds chirping their spring mating calls, stopping to pet the baby goats and watching cows being milked in the cool,



Rooftop view of Jaffa and the Mediterranean Sea

A Lush Oasis

Tel Aviv was not my final destination, just my introduction to Israel. My visit to Tel Aviv is brief, allowing me just enough time to visit the aforementioned beach, peek into the Tel Aviv International Museum of Art to glimpse Impressionism works by Van Gogh, Monet and

PHOTO COURTESY OF LISSA POIROT