



Exploring the archeological wonders of Jordan

• By NORMA MEYER

In Jordan's extraordinary rose-red "Lost City" of Petra, I have just huffed up 700 zigzagging stone-carved steps to the ancient mountaintop High Place of Sacrifice with its sacred altar and goat blood drain. And now, along a dirt trail, I rest in a rug-draped souvenir stall while an octogenarian Bedouin woman – who is traditionally clad in a long embroidered madraga dress and grew up in a cave – deftly strings a fragrant necklace of dried cloves to sell me.

Way down below, camels with tasseled bridles emit rumbling, dinosaurlike roars while being led by robed Bedouin tribesmen whose eyes are rimmed in jet-black kohl liner. Other indigenous Bedouins, head scarves atop their flowing ringlets, strangely resemble Johnny Depp's Jack Sparrow as they trot on donkeys ("you want air-conditioned taxi?") past monolithic, 2,000-year-old tombs.

Mystical, mind-blowing Petra literally rocks. Around the first century B.C., the now-extinct Nabataean people ingeniously chiseled the capital of their Arab empire from sheer sandstone cliffs; at times 30,000 inhabitants bustled about the affluent metropolis that was a major trade stopover for incense – and spice-toting camel caravans. Stretching across harsh desert terrain (Petra's archaeological park encompasses 102 square miles), the once-forgotten marvel includes intricate temples; obelisks honoring pagan gods; etchings of snakes, lions and eagles; cave dwellings; a theater; and more than 600 massive burial chambers, all hewed from soaring rock faces that bewitchingly glow in swirling hues of terra cotta, apricot and blush pink.

"Petra is one of the world's biggest mysteries," says Omar, my Jordanian guide with Exodus Travels. "There is no record of history. And 65% of Petra is still underneath our feet, hidden by dust."

For almost two weeks, I traverse much of Jordan by bus with Exodus, an adventure company that also brings us 16 intrepid voyagers to the less-visited far reaches of this Middle East nation. Petra is Jordan's primo tourist draw, but elsewhere we're the only ones clambering over archaeological ruins of a mosaic-splashed Roman fort and a Muslim dynasty's frescoed castles in no man's land. History mixes with the present – driving through the bleak parched desert, we pass a sprawling Syrian refugee camp housing 36,000 in rows of white shelters; Jordan has taken in about 1 million people who have fled the war-torn nation to its north.

Before joining our group, I spend two days in the vibrant old quarters of capital Amman and clearly stick out – locals repeatedly ask where I'm from. This is a Muslim country,



TOURISTS WALK through the narrow Siq, the same passageway traders took to enter Petra 2,000 years ago. (Norma Meyer/San Diego Union-Tribune/TNS)

and when I say "America," they all warmly reply, "Welcome to Jordan," often with their hands placed over their hearts. I'm probably welcomed 100 times – in taxis, cafes while I eat mezze plates of hummus and falafel, shops, hookah bars, streets lined with bowing worshippers outside a minaret-topped mosque.

It's the start of a cultural odyssey. With Exodus, I also retrace exploits of Lawrence of Arabia, the dashing British officer who gained fame in World War I for leading the legendary Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Turks. Pre-trip, I re-watched the 1962 Oscar-winning epic *Lawrence of Arabia*, so it's eerie to stand in the grave-

ly quiet courtyard of Qasr Al Azraq, the storied black basalt fortress where T.E. Lawrence and his Bedouin troops plotted attacks during the winter of 1917.

Another day, I'm bouncing in the blanketed bed of a Bedouin-driven Toyota pickup tearing across the UNESCO-listed Wadi Rum desert,

nicknamed "Valley of the Moon" for its rippling peach-pink sands pierced by titan sandstone and granite peaks. Lawrence and his guerrilla rebels made their base here in 1917-18, and decades later director David Lean filmed the cinematic classic in this otherworldly locale. (Planewise, Wadi Rum also subbed for Mars in the 2015 Oscar nominee *The Martian*.)

Near a commemorative rock carving of Lawrence's face, we stop at a rectangular tent woven from black goat's hair and occupied by hospitable Bedouins who offer us cardamom-and-sage tea. First, one of them has us stick out our forearms and rolls on a soaplike perfume. "It's gazelle innards," Omar says afterwards. Yuck.

Most of the Bedouins I meet speak only Arabic, so Omar gladly translates. "He says, 'You are a camel.'"

A what?

"It means you are beautiful, because camels are beautiful with their long eyelashes."

I SIT MY hump down and enjoy the steaming sweet tea, cooked in a charred brass kettle over a rudimentary fire pit. Because Muslims avoid alcohol, tea is a main social drink in Jordan, and you're constantly offered a cup in friendship. (You'll find nonalcoholic beers and nonalcoholic wines on some menus, but the rare place I hoist a glass of Cab is outside Petra's gate at the 2,000-year-old Cave Bar, touted as the world's oldest saloon. Indeed there are spirits; it's a former Nabataean family tomb.)

In Wadi Rum, I sleep inside a goat-hair tent in a rustic Bedouin camp set against wind-buffeting cliffs on the desert floor until at 4 a.m. I am awakened by a distant muezzin's melodic call to prayer and, after that, a rooster's shrill cock-a-doodle-doo.

Next I wake up the entire camp shrieking as I clumsily mount my ride. "Yalla, yalla," Rashid gently urges his herd of five sibling camels, meaning "Let's go," and soon with just one other traveler, we have the pre-dawn moonscape to ourselves.

Atop cud-chewing Aliya, I hypnotically watch the flaming sunrise turn the unending vastness a radiant gold. For 90 beyond-belief minutes, the only sounds are the camels' feet softly sinking into the powdery dunes and the chirping of Sinai rosefinches. A well-fed stray dog joins our pack, funnily bringing up the rear.

Every day of our itinerary, we hit an archaeological treasure. I feel like I'm in Italy as I wander the immense 2,000-year-old Roman city of Jerash, dubbed the "Pompeii of the Middle East" for its well-preserved ruins buried by blown sand for centuries. Cultures humorously collide: Two Bedouins, head-scarfed with red-and-white checkered keffiyehs, toot

"Yankee Doodle Dandy" on bagpipes in the Corinthian-columned amphitheater near the chariot hippodrome.

Petra, though, is the jackpot. Abandoned in the seventh century, it was rediscovered by a Swiss explorer in 1812 and became a UNESCO heritage site in 1985. Hidden away, to get to the ancient city, you have to trek through the dramatic narrow Siq, a nearly mile-long slot canyon sandwiched by 24-story-high veiny rock edifices and at times only 10 feet wide. Nature-created formations stare down in the shapes of elephants and skulls. At the end, the Siq cracks open to reveal the grandstanding, rock-whittled funerary-urn-crowned Treasury, likely a former temple. Harrison Ford galloped up to the fantastical facade in the 1989 movie "Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade" in search of the Holy Grail.

After dark, I return for the corny-cool "Petra by Night" ceremony. Even with my flashlight I can barely see as I stumble through the ghostly Siq, lit only by hundreds of luminaria candles, and then sit in the luminaria-lit dirt in front of the shadowy Treasury. Bedouins play a flute and rababa string instrument before the big reveal – spotlights suddenly bathe the Treasury in changing psychedelic colors.

Over two days I walk 23 miles in Petra because the scenes won't quit. On the High Place of Sacrifice climb, I smell the pungent smoke of juniper branches, and soon a Bedouin man is hawking me a morning shot of Arabic coffee heated by a campfire teetering on a killer-view ridge. Later, as my elderly friend Hammadeh strings that clover necklace in her ramshackle stall, she tells me through interpreter Omar how she once lived in a cave in Petra and still follows the old ways, herding her sheep and goats. Without tourism, she frets, she has no money. "I thank God. I thank God for everything," she says as I buy three more necklaces.

Petra's most jaw-dropping high place is the Monastery, accessible by hoofing up nearly 1,000 Nabataean-cut steep steps. After the path's last bend, this mammoth stone temple – it's 155 feet wide – magically pops out of a remote mountainside towering over my puny presence. From the Monastery, I continue ascending a boulder-strewn trail until next to a grazing gray donkey I see a piece of scrap wood lying against a pile of rubble and hand-scrawled, "Welcome to Top of the World Cafe." Up further, I reach the "cafe," a tattered, tented platform precariously perched over a rocky ledge in the heavens. And there, a 17-year-old Bedouin named Lost ("because you're always found," he smiles) offers me another cup of tea, this one with a sprig of mint.

– The San Diego Union-Tribune/TNS

The sound of music at Kfar Blum



TALY'S TRAVEL
• By TALY SHARON

Each winter for the past 16 years, Pastoral Hotel-Kfar Blum has organized a dozen rich, musical weekends. This year, the program was expanded to include cultural, literary, theatrical and culinary events that will take place from November to May.

We came to for a musical winter retreat. The weekend, called "Between Jerusalem and Berlin," included fine concert performances by Gil Shohat, Keren Hadar and the Ihud Choir; a musical show with Dan Almagor, Dafna Zehavi and Eyal Haviv; and the movie *The Nahariyade* with a talk by David Witzthum.

Pastoral upscale

This is an upscale lodge on a kibbutz setting that is nothing like a regular kibbutz. While the setting is pastoral, the 190 hotel rooms are spacious, elegant and feature high-standard comfort amenities, including an espresso machine, LCD satellite TV, refrigerator, safe-deposit box, Wi-fi and climate control. The rooms have an outdoor sitting area that overlooks the Galilee and Golan Heights, so guests can enjoy the 53,000 square meters of lawns and green open spaces.

The hotel facilities, lobby and rooms have been recently refurbished with an investment of some 30 million shekels, making it the first kibbutz hotel to get the highest A+B rating from Israel's Tourism Ministry.

We stayed in a boutique room featuring a classic country decor, a bath with Italian tiles and a walk-in closet, where a set of robes and slippers awaited us. Each room is named after a famous writer. Ours was named for Ernest Hemingway. The room itself was huge and the large bathroom – connected by a wide sliding door – was furnished with a French bathtub and an elliptical shower. We sat in the warm tub and enjoyed the view of the Golan Heights.

Culinary excellence

One of the highlights of staying at Pastoral Hotel-Kfar Blum was the food. The dining room serves high-quality buffet-style meals that are orchestrated by two talented individuals: Ohad Ivyg, the hotel chef, and Natalie Criden, who is in charge of the desserts, and they do an excellent job. Each meal, starting with breakfast, was rich, tasty and beautifully presented. At breakfast we enjoyed a variety of cold plates, salads and many varieties of high-end cheeses. A hot buffet filled with shakshuka, pies, ravioli and more, was followed by great pastries served with cups of cappuccino. Dinner was a gastronomic event. Beyond the large selection of salads, antipasti and cold starters, the dinner buffet included a selection of small tapas appetizer plates – a standard of luxury restaurants. A decent complimentary Golan Heights Cabernet Sauvignon wine was served and the dessert buffet was extravagantly laden with colorful macaroons, petit fours and fruit trays. Every afternoon, a rich dessert buffet was served. We felt we were being pampered at every meal, and frankly, ate too much!

Spa delights

A winter's vacation is incomplete without a good massage. Pastoral Hotel-Kfar Blum's spa is small and intimate but it features some unique facilities. Besides a Turkish bath (*hamam*) and a Finnish sauna, it has a rain-cave, a tipping bucket and foot-reflexology Jacuzzis. I started with the hamam and when it was too hot to bear, I tried the freezing tipping bucket, then ran back to the hamam, making a stop at the rain cave where automatic splashing water in different temperatures refreshed me as I passed through. Then, I went back to the hamam and felt warm and relaxed. After a few rounds of this, I was ready for a good massage and chose the warm-stone variety. It's a specialty of the spa and it was excellent!

The spa accompanies a small, but well-equipped gym in the basement, along with



KFAR BLUM is in full bloom, and what better way to see the area than with Tiyulei Hadan, located in Kibbutz Dafna, which rents bikes of all types. (Taly Sharon/Michael Sharon)

a rest area with herbal tea. The spa offers a variety of massages and facial and body treatment and features Christina products.

Choice activities

The hotel is well-situated in the center of the Galilee Panhandle. It is also quite popular with families. Along with a seasonal Olympic pool, Kfar Blum Kayaks are within a walking distance at the well-known Jordan Promenade. Kiryat Shmona is only short drive away.

On Friday morning, as part of its weekend program, the hotel offered guided tours – one to Biriya Forest and one to Mount Arbel. We chose the Arbel trip. A bus, a guide, and a bag with water and snack awaited us at the reception. The trip was wonderful and included a nice walk on which we saw ancient graves, a wine press and the archaeological remains of the Arbel Synagogue. As we walked down the hill toward the valley we saw caves and animals. Aviad, our guide, was very knowledgeable about the topography and history of the area. We returned just in time for lunch after a perfect morning.

The next day, we skipped yoga at the hotel in favor of a self-guided bike tour.

Bike tours

Tiyulei Hadan is located on Kibbutz Dafna and rents bikes of all types, including children's bikes, tandems, electric bikes and club cars. They provide the maps and all the help one needs to go on a self-guided tour of the area. We took bikes and helmets and the complimentary map and headed out to the Kibbutz plantations that are located alongside Dafna, Dan and the Hazbani rivers. A well-marked path led us alongside the avocado and mandarin plantations as we stopped by the rivers to rest and freshen up. In the summer, the riders also stop by the rivers to take a dip or have a picnic. This route in particular is very popular with families.

(The Dan Trips at Kibbutz Dafna – Ofnaim. co.il/ Tel: 972-54-784-4964)

Musical and cultural programs

The musical events at Pastoral Hotel-Kfar Blum include many musical and cultural weekends. In February, weekends feature rock & roll with Yair Nizani and a "Venice Mask Festival" in cooperation with the Israeli Opera, hosted by the ambassador of Italy in Israel. Literary weekends and a "Love Weekend" with Bari Saharov and Lov

will follow in March. April will host a jazz weekend with Alon Oleartchiik and May will be home to "Baroque Weekend" with the British cultural attaché.

The rich program of excellent concerts, shows and talks during our stay made the weekend engaging and entertaining. I especially enjoyed Gil Shohat and Keren Hadar's concert. Keren's singing was divine and Gil is always interesting and he plays piano beautifully.

The people at Pastoral Hotel-Kfar Blum pay attention to the smallest details. When the evening's concert ended and we went out to the lobby, they awaited us with Sangria and chips. We got the weekend newspaper on Friday, a five o'clock coffee and cake every afternoon and all the attention one could hope for to make for a perfect stay.

Room prices include breakfast and start from NIS 1,440 during weekdays and on weekends. Prices are higher on holidays and during the musical weekends, but can often be found at a last-minute discount at online booking sites.

Pastoral Hotel-Kfar Blum, Tel +972-4-683-6611, <http://www.kfarblum-hotel.co.il/>

The writer was a guest of Kfar Blum and Tiyulei Dan.