

# Our Adventures to Egypt and Jordan in November of 2023

Contributed by Janice Johnson

As we sit at home awaiting the start of our trip, we had been watching the horrific developments in Israel and Gaza. Both countries are immediate neighbours to Egypt and Jordan. We checked the Canadian Travel Advisory daily and it continues to sit as 'Extreme Caution'. As a result, we will be going ahead with the trip. In our group there was now 14 members as 12 decided to defer to next year. If the advisory should change to 'Essential Travel Only', we can then cancel without penalty. Thirteen days to departure and we are preparing to go. With the war and then the difficulty getting our visas, we couldn't help wonder if the trip is even going to happen.

And then it did!

After a very long flight...9.5 hours to Heathrow and another 4.5 to Cairo, we arrived at our destination around 11pm. From there we were very well looked after! Mohammed, a representative for Trip Merchant, met us as we walked towards the customs area. He whisked us through security and onto a waiting bus in no time at all. A totally stress-free experience. Then it was to our hotel, the Conrad Cairo Hilton. Again, Mohammed looked after all the paperwork and all we had to do was find our room and get some badly needed sleep.

**Nov 5th** found us up by 6 am, breakfast by 7 and out the door by 8 am. This was to be the norm while here in Cairo. Our friendly tour guide, Remy, was to be a fountain of knowledge throughout our trip. Since tourism is the largest industry in Egypt, guides are required to have a least a 4-year history degree and they often speak 3 or more languages. He possessed the amazing skill of keeping us all on time, informed and enthralled. Remy even negotiated with the sellers of wares alongside us, so that we got the best prices and best merchandise. He helped us understand their extensive history, religion and culture as it has evolved through many centuries.



Still somewhat jet lagged, we visited the Amazing Museum. This is where the mask and some items of King Tut were on display along with so many other artifacts. While King Tut seemed to be the major draw for many tourists, I found some of the other artifacts even more interesting. There was the stone depicting the history of Egypt's first pharaoh, Naramar that is almost 5,000 years old. And then there were the statues and the silver sarcophagus discovery in 1942. So many fascinating things to see! The side photo is a 2" statue of King Khufu. It is the only image of him ever found.



After lunch we continued to the Museum of Civilization. This museum is only about mummies. No photos are permitted, and people are asked to remain quiet, not that everyone does. After watching a video about the mummies being transferred here, we entered a cool, darkish area that has become the pharaohs' final resting place. They are so respectably displayed and so obviously important to the Egyptian people that it was a privilege to see them. The majority on display were from the era of the Ramsey's, including Ramsey the 2nd.

**Nov 6<sup>th</sup>** was another early day but what a day it was! This is the day we visited the pyramids of Giza. Seeing them in person is a totally different experience from seeing them in pictures. They are huge! No wonder there are so many questions as to how they were built. But seeing them from the outside was not enough. There was an inside to be explored.



Five of us braved the climb into King Khufu's pyramid -- the Great Pyramid of Giza. It is the only pyramid where the tomb is above ground as all the rest are under the pyramids. The passage into the pyramid is narrow. Two people can pass but it is close. The first bit is a gradual incline and then we go up! This included stairs and short ladders, and finally, just before reaching the tomb enclosure, the ceiling drops and we had to squat to get through. Then we were there.



The chamber is quite small with the sarcophagus dominating the room. There are no decorations on the walls, but the ceiling is made of three huge marble slabs stretching across it. Our visit was brief as there was not a lot to see and it was hot and close in the space.

Then it was the decline to get back out. We found that climbing out backwards made the descent much easier. This was a very hot, stuffy expedition but well worth the effort.

From there we made our way to another fun adventure. There were camels waiting to take us to our lunch spot. So much fun! In order to get on them, the camels sat down, we stepped into a stirrup and swung our legs across their backs. Then, as the camel stood up, we had to hold on to the pommel, lean backwards and then forwards to help with the standing momentum. The camels walk with quite a swaying, rocking motion that was easy to relax into. I loved every second of the experience. Best thing though, is that we didn't have to worry about anything as our tour guides did everything for us. What a morning!



After lunch we headed to the Step Pyramid in Sakkara. This stone pyramid was a bit of a surprise. I have seen countless pictures of it, and it was exactly as shown, except much bigger than I expected. It was the surrounding courtyard, though, that I did not expect. This pyramid is the oldest and largest archaeological site in Egypt and sits in the center of a large, enclosed area which once hosted the king's celebrations of rulership. It was even more fascinating than



the pyramid itself was the quartz Pharaoh sculpture was still standing and in excellent condition.

One more stop before the day was done, the Great Sphinx of Giza. Even through our lack of sleep, the Sphinx was impressive. Like the Step Pyramid, it is surrounded by a large courtyard that we wandered through. The Sphinx itself was fenced off to keep people from touching it as the sandstone is old and dry.



The dryness is the current belief as to why its face has fallen. Not the word-of-mouth story that was being used for cannon practice.

**Nov 7th** was another interesting day though not as exciting as the day before. A small group of us visited the Citadel and Coptic City which was built to defend against the Crusaders. During that time the citizens of Cairo lived inside the walls. Hard to believe that the 24,000,000 person population of this city was ever that small.

We then also visited Islamic and Jewish areas of the old city. The fascinating part of this tour was how the three religious' beliefs, Christian, Islamic and Jewish, seemed to share ideas and symbols. We saw ancient places of worship 2000 years old, saw where St George was supposedly imprisoned, and where Mary and Jesus reportedly hid. Many beautiful, old paintings and icons were in these old places of worship. Overall, well worth seeing.

Citadel



Mosque

Hanging Church

As we walked back to our bus, we passed through a residential area that has probably been there as long as the churches. An elderly woman invited us to see the inside of her home, and we quickly accepted the invite. As expected, it was small but still had three rooms, a kitchen area, sleeping/ living area and a loft where the children slept. Very small and cramped with minimal modern conveniences. It was interesting to see how people have been living for thousands of years. And yes, this did cost a tip.



**Nov 8th** found us at the airport again to fly to Aswan. This area is quite beautiful with its green riverbanks and flowering trees and gardens. Yes, the poverty is here too, but not as apparent



as in Cairo. After landing at the airport our guide, whisked us onto a waiting bus and took us straight to our hotel, the Sonesta Nouba Hotel. This beautiful boutique style hotel is about a twenty-minute drive south of Aswan and is right along the Nile River. There are no other hotels nearby, so it is quiet and private. Each room is a little attached cabana that is accessed at the back from an enclosed walkway. The front opens up into a semiprivate patio and looks directly at the Nile. The dining area was outside, along the bank of the Nile. It was a peaceful, enjoyable place to stay.

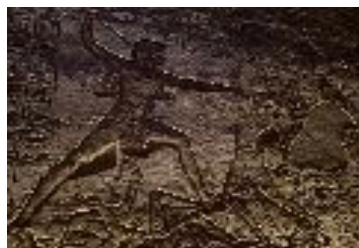
A group from the tour, with our helpful guide Remy, spent this evening at the spice market in downtown Aswan. They purchased saffron, turmeric and many other spices as well as linen, souvenirs and perfume for great prices. They had glowing reports about the experience, but we chose to chill out and enjoy the hotel for the evening. Stunning sunsets seem to be the norm.



**Nov 9th** was another busy, amazing day. A small group of us flew to Abu Simbel this morning. It was a pricey trip but well worth the cost and the time. We Aswan in 1.5 hours vs the 6 hour drive other tour groups did. This got us to Ramsey II 's temple before the mass of tourists arrived.

This temple is massive with its four gigantic statues of Ramsey. The first one depicts him when he became Pharaoh at the age of 20. Each successive one depicts him 20 years older....20, 40, 60 80. (Apparently, he lived to be 92 years old). This was just outside of the temple. Once we entered there were many scenes of him defeating his enemies. In one he is riding his chariot and shooting arrows at his enemies, in another he is shown clubbing them to death, and another of him holding a severed head. Ramsey really knew how to spread the ideal that he was a strong, powerful pharaoh who was not to be challenged.

At the very back of the temple are another four statues. The Gods Amun, Ra-Heractates, then Ramsey, and Ptah. Twice a year the sun's rays shines through the temple's entrance and highlight the first two gods and then Ramsey himself. He was telling his enemies that he was God himself. The sun never reaches Ptah as he is the god of the dark.



Next to the temple he also erected a temple in tribute to his favourite wife, Nefertiti. It was smaller but still grand. On the outside there are six statues, two of Ramsey, and one of Nefertiti



on each side of the entrance. Inside are statues of her and paintings of gods and such on the walls.

It was worth noting that both these temples had to be moved because of the High Dam. The temples were originally near the Nile River but behind the dam. They were both moved block by block and reassembled exactly as the originals.

We only had two hours here but it was enough. We then drove back to the airport to return to Aswan. Those who stayed at the hotel bragged about a very relaxing day around the pool.

Then back at the Sonesta Nouba for a cleanup and dinner which was followed by a visit to the Philea Temple light show. We drove back into town to the river's edge where we climbed into colourful skiffs that took us to the temple. Now, maybe we were



just tired from the heat and the Abu Simbel trip, but this excursion was disappointing. The show was a laser light show telling the story of Isis, Osiris and Horus. The story was broadcast over loudspeakers as the lights flashed on the images on the walls. Because it was being broadcast in a different language, we listened to the English interpretation of story through headphones. This made it difficult to follow the story line. The light show did not match the high cost of the entrance fee. We told our guide and it likely will be changed for the next tour group as they seek to please us in every way.

**Nov10th** was very much a tour day. We travelled by bus across the original (lower) Nile dam and continued about half an hour to the newer High Dam. It is a tourist attraction and was interesting in its height and the creation of Lake Nasser. We also took a few minutes to visit to Egyptian/Russian friendship monument. It is near the dam as Russia was the only country that agreed to help pay for the dam without strings attached.



When we returned to Aswan we visited the Philea Temple once again. Our guide walked us through the temple and explained in detail what we were looking at. The temple was built to honour the goddess's Isis and Hatho, and the Gods Horis and Osiris. As Isis was married to Osiris and Horis was their son, and with Hatho being the goddess of all life, last night's light now made some sense. I think the light show might have been better had we seen the temple in the daylight first, though I doubt it. We gave feedback to our very competent tour guide so changes could be made for the next group who came to witness this awesome experience.

After our morning excursions we boarded our cruise ship, the Sonesta Moon Goddess. She has two levels of outside cabins without balconies. The ship itself is older, but clean. The dining area is a buffet, situated at water level. The lounge area is on third floor and the top outer level is a nice deck with a large, covered area. Getting on and off was easy but we frequently had to walk through the ships between us and the dock. Of course, there were others who walked through ours.

Good way to get a peek at the other ships. Ours was a well-appointed one with wonderful staff.



The remainder of the day was mostly about settling in. We met the captain and staff and then following dinner some of us went on a sunset in felucca (small sailboats). Pretty setting but very warm as there was no breeze. Once back to the ship we were entertained by a Nubian Folklore Show and yes, there was a belly dancer, too.

**Nov 11th.** Today is the start of our Nile River cruise. As we did not leave until about 2 pm, we had the morning to do our own thing. A small group of us decided to visit the very famous Cataract Hotel, where Agatha Christie wrote her book 'Murder on the Nile'. It is a beautiful, old, expensive hotel right below the first cataract. The decor was right out of the 30's making it feel as though we had gone back in time. We were charged an



entrance fee but we were able to use the ticket as credit for drinks, which we happily drank on the

patio overlooking the river. Oh, to be that wealthy! The rooms range between \$500

and \$5000 per night.



There was a bit of excitement getting there and back though. Two of the women with us decided to walk to the hotel while the rest of us took an Uber. Unfortunately, one of the two who walked back was pick pocketed. Two men came up to one of them, spoke to her and then the wallet went missing.

However, within a few minutes another man came running up to them and passed the wallet back saying, "You dropped this." before running off. I like to think the second man saw what happened and was trying to help. Some money was missing but that was all. The woman who lost a few Egyptian pounds was not at all upset as she chalked it up to experience and a great story to tell her friends back on Vancouver Island.

Our Uber group had a confrontation with a taxi driver who was annoyed that we were taking the Uber. It was suggested by our guide as the most affordable way to go. Fortunately, our guide was there so we didn't have to deal with him. However, when we pulled out the taxi



aggressively followed us but our wonderful Uber driver was able to maneuver away from him. After our visit to the hotel, we had minutes to spare before our driver picked us up, so we took a walk along the street. A horse and buggy quickly turned up and tried to get us to take a ride. When he wouldn't take no for an answer we returned to the hotel and waited for our driver, who turned up right on time. We didn't give the horse and buggy any thought until we got back to the ship and learned that he was working with the taxi driver. Interesting lesson for us.

I will mention that many merchants were assertive when selling their wares. Most often they are men. Selling items is their main source of income and with tourist numbers down, I would suggest they are hungry for customers. Bartering is the way of business, and some of our group were much better at it than others. More than 40% of the people are below the poverty line without a social safety net to support them.

Once we got back to the ship it was departure time, which we watched from the top deck. There appeared to be no rhyme or reason as to how the dozens of ships departed. They all left at the same time, jockeying for position. We were docked in conjunction with three other ships with the outer most departing first and the one closest to the dock last. Somehow it all worked.



Later in the afternoon we made a short visit to Kom Ombo where the temple honours the gods Sobek and Haeroris. While not a large temple, the architecture is one of the few original sites remaining below the Aswan Dam. It was built during the Ptolemaic Dynasty and shows its Greek influence both in hieroglyphic and structure. It also has a Nilometer which looks like a deep well. It was used to measure the water level of the Nile. The higher the water level meant a productive year for the farmer and thus higher taxes.



We then did a quick visit to the Crocodile Museum to see the

mummified crocodiles. Interesting to see as they were well preserved. Then back to the ship for dinner and our sail away.



**Nov 12.** This was an early rise morning. We were up and off the ship - coffee and muffins in hand by 6:30am. This allowed us to be in line to enter Edfu before the masses of tourists arrived. And that they did. By the time the gates opened, the line was wrapped around the parking lot. Dozens of horses and buggies were arriving to wait for tourists also. But the early start was worth it. Edfu is the temple referred to on the Rosetta Stone and is beautifully preserved. The reason it is preserved is because it was buried in sand for centuries and did not get pillaged. It is the most complete and attractive of any of the temples we saw.

By the time we left it was starting to get hot and the crowds were growing. Very glad to have arrived early.



From Edfu we relaxed on the ship and enjoyed the scenery. We were also entertained by the peddlers who attached their skiffs to the cruise ship and proceeded to sell their wares. If you showed interest (as one of our group did) they would throw the plastic bagged item up the four levels to you on the deck. If you didn't want the item, you would throw it back the skiff, but if you were interested the bartering started. Our group members had items flying back and forth before a sale price was agreed upon. The peddlers would then throw up another item and the money was put into the bag and thrown back to the skiff. The deal was done.

By mid-morning we docked in Luxor where we visited the Luxor temple. This temple is along the bank of the Nile and is huge. It had been added to over the centuries by the various pharaohs with the Ramsey II marking the entrance with gigantic statues of himself. The main walkway through it has towering pillars, some built in the early Egyptian style while others show the Greek influence of later years. Outside the temple there is a three-mile-long road lined with sphinx on both sides. Everywhere we looked there was something else that was fascinating to see.



Our ship's entertainment this evening consisted of a belly dancer and a whirling dervish. Both acts were excellent while the whirling dervish was jaw dropping. This young man, who was dressed in layers of 'skirts', spun in a circle

for about 15 minutes. All the time he was spinning he was changing the layers from different colours, to lights, to his shoulder and even over his head. It was an incredible performance.

After this amazing, but long day, bed sure looked good.





On the last night of our cruise everyone was invited to dress up in traditional Egyptian garb for dinner. Our guide, Remy seated forefront helped some of us barter for the appropriate gallabiyah (Egyptian dress).

**Nov 13th** Another early morning start today. By 8 am we had said our final farewells to our cruise ship and made our way to the West Bank. We were travelling in a small bus along with what looked like dozens other buses. In typical Egyptian style we jockeyed for position to see who could get to the Valley of the Kings first. Our talented driver got us there early.



The Valley was fascinating. Our ticket allowed us into three tombs only, so we paid extra to get into Ramsey V and VI. On our guide's advice we stuck to Ramsey tombs. They were by far the most detailed, colourful and preserved. We saw Ramsey IV, IX, V and VI (in the same tomb) and I went alone to see Ramsey the It tomb. King



Tutankhamen's tomb was right there but we opted not to enter it. It was expensive to see and nothing, but his mummy was in it. I was happy to just get a picture of us standing beside the entrance. We were also fortunate to have arrived early as the crowds were minimal, which allowed us to take lots of pictures, some with no one in them. The tombs were spell binding especially when you consider the fact that no human was ever meant to see them.



Following lunch at a cute B&B, we visited Hatshepsut's Temple. By now the crowds had found us making it difficult to actually enter the temple. We peaked in but there really was not much to see inside. The temple has been ravaged over the centuries leaving the exterior the most fascinating part. The columns and statues have been well preserved and just seeing this temple was well worth dealing with the crowds and hot temperatures.

After our very busy day we headed to our new hotel, the Steiginger Ahti Luxor. In order to get there our guide had arranged for us to arrive by boat. We boarded the colourfully decorated skiff and sailed along the Nile until we arrived at our night's accommodation. This was another nice hotel along the riverbank.



But we didn't get a lot of time to enjoy the hotel and that evening continued as we visited the Karnak Temple. This is another huge temple, even bigger than Luxor Temple. The Karnak Temple is at the other end of that 3 mile long sphinx lined road. It is where the king started his visit and then was carried to the Luxor temple. By now, we were all pretty tapped out, but they were still incredible to see.



**Nov 14th** was a very, very early 3:30 am morning. This was our own doing as we all made so much noise about doing this. Our guide arranged a hot air balloon ride over Valley of the Nobles and Hatshepsut's tomb. This was not part of our tour package but was oh so worth the extra cost!!



We boarded our minibus at 3:30 am and slowly made our way through a traffic jam of similar vehicles towards the bridge crossing the Nile. Along the way all the vehicles came to a complete stop while the drivers and guides honoured the morning call to prayer. After this, it was an eye-popping experience as all the vehicles jockeyed to get in front of each other. The more aggressive drivers got ahead; we got ahead. Once we crossed the bridge the traffic moved more smoothly as we continued to our destination on a field not far from the location of Hatshepsut's temple. We arrived, along with a long line of other vans, in the pitch dark. All we could see were darker patches on the ground which turned out to be our balloons. For the next half hour, we stood and watched the spectacular sight of the balloons glowing and growing as they were prepared for the flight. Then we climbed into ours.



Our balloon was the biggest one holding up to 24

passengers, one of whom was the pilot who had ridden in the van with us. Even though the basket was full, everyone had good views and what incredible views they were!



As we slowly ascended the ride was so smooth that I never even noticed we when initially left the ground. I was too busy watching all the other beautiful balloons rising around us. They literally glowed in the dark. As we were rising, we watched the sun come up over Luxor and the Nile and the whole of the area slowly come into view. Breathtakingly beautiful. The distinction between lush green farmlands and the desert was like a line drawn at their edges. We then did a slow 360 deg. rotation giving us a complete view of the area. The temple of Hatshepsut, the Valley of the Queens and Nobles and even the location of the Valley of the Kings all came into perspective. Then it was time to descend.



The descent was as gentle as the liftoff. It was entertaining to watch the ground crews chase after the balloons that wandered off course. Ours needed to be pulled by our ground team to our landing spot. What a wonderful way to finish off our last day along the Nile River.

Once back to the hotel we grabbed our belongings and left Luxor for a 4.5 hour bus trip to Hurgadada. We were about 15 minutes into our ride when our guide received a call from the hotel that someone had left their passport in their room. This meant a turnaround back to the hotel. Fortunately, we were not too far away so it only added about half an hour to the trip.

Once we passed out of Luxor, we were into miles of farmland. Many people still used horse carts and donkeys for transportation, just as they have for thousands of years. Then we reached the desert of the Sinai Peninsula. For the remainder of the trip we saw little besides the mile upon mile of rock and sand. Pretty desolate ground. It was a good time to sit back and catch up on some sleep.

Upon arriving at our hotel, we were treated like VIPs. This place is beautiful and expensive. Our rooms are like cabins attached in rows. Each one has a sitting room with the bed area separated by pillars. It has a walk-in closet/dressing area, and a huge washroom with a glass wall separating it from the outside, private courtyard. It also has an additional, enclosed courtyard with table and chairs plus two lounge chairs with an umbrella. We knew it was going to be enjoyable here.



**Nov 15th** The five-star Oberoi Beach Resort gave us a day for rest and relaxation. After all the traveling, today was all about doing nothing. It meant sleeping in, taking naps, hanging around the pool or maybe taking a dip in the beautiful expansive Red Sea. The Red Sea wasn't as salty as our west coast Pacific Ocean.

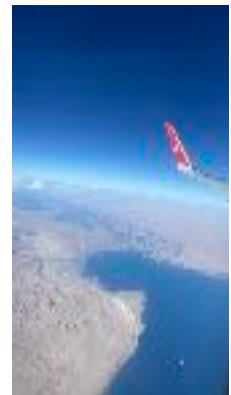


**Nov 16.** After a day of total R and R. It was swim day. The wind and waves were down so around noon, so I rented snorkeling gear and jumped into the Red Sea where I remained for a good forty-five minutes. There is a coral bed just offshore where fish of every colour under the sun conglomerate. I would just quietly float as they swarmed around me. Beautiful beyond compare.

Then after a much-needed lunch I was joined by one of our travel companions who decided to join me for a snorkel. Unfortunately, the wind had come up, along with the waves and we both got pushed towards the coral bed. As a result, we were called back in. The lifeguard told us he would guide us around the coral so, with him, we walked to the far end of the beach and swam back towards the pier. The guiding basically meant hanging on to the life preserver as he pulled it through the water. In reality, we shouldn't have been out there at all. The waves made the swim tiring and the viewing poor. My partner struggled with the waves, so the lifeguard put the preserver around her and we headed to the pier. All this for a poor viewing of the fish as they had gone deeper, and the water was sandy.

Tonight, we had our delicious farewell dinner as the Egypt section of our trip is done. Half the group of 14 were heading home tomorrow. We had become a close-knit group, and it was sad to see us split up. Only seven of us were continuing on to Jordan.

**Nov 17** Travel day. We flew from Hurghada to Cairo and then Cairo to Jordan. Having guides with us definitely made the process quick and easy. Both flights were just over an hour long. As we flew towards Amman, I glanced out the window and saw the Suez Canal. Never in my wildest dreams did I think I would see it. Even from the sky it looks impressive.





Once we arrived in Amman Airport, we all learned a lesson about travelling to security conscious countries. When we collected our luggage from the carousel, one of them didn't arrive. The luggage was nowhere to be found so we all waited, hoping it was just delayed. Finally, our travel representative turned up and together they talked to the officials. It turned out that the bag had been pulled because there were binoculars in it. As security was extremely tight here, the security people were concerned the binoculars could be used for spying purposes. Once they saw that they were small birding binoculars the bag was returned.

Our next stop was at our hotel in Amman. This is a modern progressive city built from limestone and cement. Lots of solar panels and electric cars here. After Egypt, the air smells clean and there is no garbage to be seen. The Marriot was very nice and super comfortable.

**Nov 18th** was a long day. Starting at 8 in the morning we drove for approximately an hour to the city of Jerash. This is the home of one of the most complete ancient Roman towns outside of Italy. We spent over two hours here exploring these impressive remains starting with the



chariot racetrack. Much of it still remains including the main entrance arches and walls, observation seats, and horse stalls. The track itself looks like it could be used today. From there we explored the main courtyard with its circle of standing pillars and the



crossroads. Some of the original paving stones show chariot/wagon tracks. Also to be explored were the temples and the mostly intact theatre. There was a Jordanian man dressed in his traditional clothing in the theatre playing bagpipes with the sound resonating throughout the whole area. That wasn't expected!



Then back to the bus for a visit to Mt. Nebo. This is where Moses is said to have first seen the promised land and is believed to have died and been buried. It is a small site, but its religious importance and the ancient olive trees and well-preserved mosaics demonstrate their reverence for this holy site.



Next, we traveled for roughly another hour to visit Madaba. This is a small, non-touristy community that has been around since well before the Roman period. It is famous for its Madaba Mosaic Map which is a tiled mosaic map of the old world. The Greek Orthodox Basilica where it was discovered, is in the process of being renovated so it was a quick visit.

The photo shows the mosaics illustration of the River of Jordan flowing into the Dead Sea. The fish are trying to swim away from the Sea before they die from the salt.

Then to the bus again, for another three hours. A large part of this trip to Petra was after dark so it was a good time to snooze. We stayed at the Petra Marriot which is perched on the top of the hillside. The views would have been spectacular if it weren't dark outside.

Here we were once again treated to fabulous 4 course meals that everyone raved about.

**Nov 19th** Petra - amazing, amazing, amazing!

My only regret about this place is that we did not have two full days to enjoy and explore it. While it is promoted as a full day visit, the reality is that we only had about half a day...before the rain started. Only 5 % has been uncovered, as Jordan wishes to keep the World Heritage site designation.



We started our visit with a 2 km walk through the Siq the main entrance to the ancient Nabatean city through a long very narrow canyon. This in itself was well worth the visit. The sandstone cliffs have been carved by centuries of wind and water leaving unique rock formations that are striking in the red, white and yellow sandstone that naturally paint the walls. Along the sides of this canyon the early inhabitants, the Nabataeans, built dams and a water system to channel water to the city. Much of the channel is still visible. Then just as we came to end of the it we got our first glimpse, through a very narrow passage, of Petra's famous Treasury. What an introduction to this fascinating site.

I have seen many pictures of the Treasury in Petra, but they do not do justice to this magnificent structure. Of all the sites in Petra, it was the best persevered. We could not enter it as it was closed to tourists to help preserve it but that didn't matter. Just seeing it was enough. It was also here that the local Bedouin men were selling their wares. There were tables (boards) lining the roadway with everything and anything for sale. Frankincense and myrrh used in ancient times are still



considered extremely precious.



Unlike Egypt where there are no social programs, here in Jordan everyone gets a minimum wage, free health and education. The sellers here were not aggressive.



But it wasn't the wares that held our attention. Once we left the Treasury area, we discovered a carved city that just kept on going. Tomb frontages and temple remains were everywhere. The tombs date back to Nabataean times while the temples were mostly from the Roman era and included a road paved in rocks and pillars and columns throughout. There is also a Roman theatre there.

After walking through all this we stopped for lunch at a unique restaurant. It was in a cave which was once used as a home. It was basic but good food and it fortunately had one of the few flush toilets in the area.



Our biggest disappointment is that we didn't have a couple of days to continue exploring this fascinating place. Instead, shortly after lunch we felt a sprinkle of rain. Now, we knew there was a possibility of rain today but hoped it would hold off as Petra is not a place to be in a rainstorm. The Siq, while beautiful, is a natural funnel for rainwater.

Several of us decided to walk quickly back up the canyon while others opted to take a jeep. Horses and camels were also available. Even the local peddlers were packing up and leaving.

Not long after getting back to our hotel the sky's opened with a thunderous rainstorm. It rained so hard that we could hear it pounding on the hotel roof even leaking in a small area of the dining room. Thank goodness it waited until after our visit to Petra.

### Nov 20th Wadi Rum

We started our day at 8 am, in a very heavy fog. The visibility was such that the sides of the road were barely visible. Last night's rain created gullies along the road and though the hills, which in turn left mud on the roads. Knowing how narrow and steep that road was I can only praise Mather, our driver, for getting us safely to the lowlands.

Our destination this morning was Wadi Rum, another beautiful, fascinating place. This is a desert area with red sandstone about. This is where Lawrence of Arabia, Dune 1 & 2, and the Martian were filmed. Fortunately, we had no rain or fog but it was windy and cold! We bundled up in every layer we had and crawled onto the benches in the back of pickup trucks known as desert jeeps. A quick drive along the paved road ..brrrrr... got us to the stunning red desert sands. These desert sands are surrounded by rugged sandstone mountains carved by wind and erosion.



The first stop was at a short land bridge carved by the wind. This was followed by a visit to a Bedouin camp. The camp was a traditional Bedouin tent, made from woven camel hair that was surprising large and offered good protection from the wind and sand. We were served some of their tasty tea, and happily bought some of their items.

The second stop was at another beautiful sight where we walked through the sandstone. The colours and shapes of the mountains once again were stunning. There were petroglyphs here depicting men and camels, and women giving birth. There are some newer ones in early Arabic which are also ancient. Our final stop was at a sand dune where we kicked off our shoes and started up the slope. Doing it in bare feet was easier than with shoes as shoes fill up with sand. There were only two of us who continued to the top and I am glad we did. The panoramic view really brought the beauty of the area to life. This was also one of the prime spots used in Lawrence of Arabia.



From there it was back into the trucks and then visitor area. As we drove the small rounded 'Martian'

tourists stay in overnight along with Bedouin slowly making their way across the red sands. We now had a group decision to make. We rainstorm we experienced last night in Petra



returned to the back, we spotted sleep huts, that camel herders

learned that the had not only



flooded Petra (thank goodness we saw it yesterday) but had also closed some of the northern highways. That same weather system was now hanging over crusader castle in Karak which was our next destination. It took very little conversation amongst us to go along with our guide's alternate destination. So rather than Karnak, we headed to Aqaba in southern Jordan



on the bank of the Red Sea. The old Ottoman castle is the fortress that Lawrence of Arabia conquered by attacking from the rear.

Much of the fort was destroyed in 1917 with the British navy bombing it, although it has been partially restored and was still interesting.

Aqaba is a pretty coastal community which attracts many tourists. We only stayed here long enough to have lunch and view the shoreline. We could see the Jordanian King's castle and Israel on the other bank.



We feasted on fresh fish, tahini, pita, olives, and salads in a traditional dining room. It was difficult to eat much as we were so full of all of the amazing meals we had consumed over this trip. Now we headed to our final destination on the Dead Sea.

### **Nov 21. Dead Sea.**

Driving here made for a long trip as it was mostly in the dark. One 'comfort stop' we made was at a sovereign tourist trap. I did buy a nice bag here though...we were told everything was half price which was great, except...nothing was priced. Negotiating got the price of my bag down further than the unmarked half price. I do like my Petra bag. Another friend got an amazing camel hair rug that was mailed directly to Canada at no extra cost. She loves it, too!

After that there was plenty of time to have a nap. That was I our water bottles started to snap and crackle. It sounded as though they were being squished, which turned out they were. We were descending to our hotel at the Dead Sea and the scrunching of the bottles was due to the higher air pressure as we dropped about 430 metres below sea level. Welcome to the Dead Sea, the lowest point on Earth.

Once again, our hotel was very nice. Our room looked over the Dead Sea and at night we could see the lights of Jerusalem and Bethlehem. While we felt perfectly safe, the close proximity. (22 km) to these places was a bit surreal during these tense times.



We spent our one full day at the sea. It is actually a lake but due to the salt content, it is referred to as a sea. And salt it has! The water is so dense that I think it would be impossible to drown in it. It was even difficult to walk in it, so we walked backwards. It was like trying to walk up a fast-flowing creek...one step firmly planted before the next one was taken. I tried to swim in it but again, a difficult motion, so I relented, rolled onto my back and just floated. What an amazing sensation to just lay on the water and allow the waves to gently push us along. We also did a mud bath with a salt scrub. After spreading mud all over ourselves, a young man scrubbed us with salt from

the Sea. We then went back into the water and allowed it to rinse off. This was followed by a good freshwater rinse. Everyone one of us commented on how soft our skin felt after that.



The rest of the day was spent just hanging around the pool and getting ready for our midnight flight home. Saying goodbye to our new friends was sad, but we did so with a final scrumptious meal. So glad we were able to do this once in a lifetime trip with them.

A final note on the political situation. Nowhere on the trip did we feel concerned. The airports had high security, especially in Amman. There were also more road checks here than anywhere else on this trip. That being said, we felt safe and well cared for. I am very glad we went ahead with the trip. The peoples of both Israel and Gaza are in our thoughts.

Editor's Notes:

The people of Egypt and Jordan were respectful, humble and very helpful. They were not interested in taking sides in the war, especially as it had just begun. Historically there has always been trouble 'over there' and they just hoped it would end peacefully for everyone's sakes.

Many travel books and advisories suggest that while in Egypt/Jordan women should wear long sleeves, avoid short shorts and bring a head scarf in order to respect local customs. Because we were in tourist areas, long sleeves and scarves, while definitely not needed, were still useful in avoiding sunburn and wind. No one saw a mosquito or even got a bite.

The food was always fresh and usually organic. Where we stayed you could get almost everything from traditional Mediterranean foods, to hamburgers, schnitzel, and even fresh sushi.

They did their best to accommodate gluten, lactose, vegan and other dietary needs. Many felt we came back at least 5 lbs. heavier.

To avoid jet lag, some of us arrived a few days earlier. We were able to get a feel of what it was like to live in the bustling city of Cairo. It was easy to hire a local guide, bus or Uber or just take a leisurely walk along the Nile. The hotel was very happy to help us with suggestions.



Trip Merchant had everything very well organized and kept in touch with the Egyptian and Jordan tour company, our terrific guides and even ourselves. Late one night I texted Tom Mclean, one of the owners of Trip Merchant, thinking he would get back the next day as there was no rush. Tom got back immediately even though he was on another group trip in Scotland. The care and support we received throughout the trip was terrific. We had the use of the Vamoos app that listed the daily events and options to keep us informed and to share stories and photos with our group.



Last but not least, there were many gorgeous Egyptian cats wandering about, most well cared for as well as friendly stray dogs. One of our guides even saved our leftover food (as there was always too much) to share with the animals that we saw along the way.

It was truly the trip of a lifetime. So many sights, so much to see and do. Well worth going!  
Marsha Arnold