

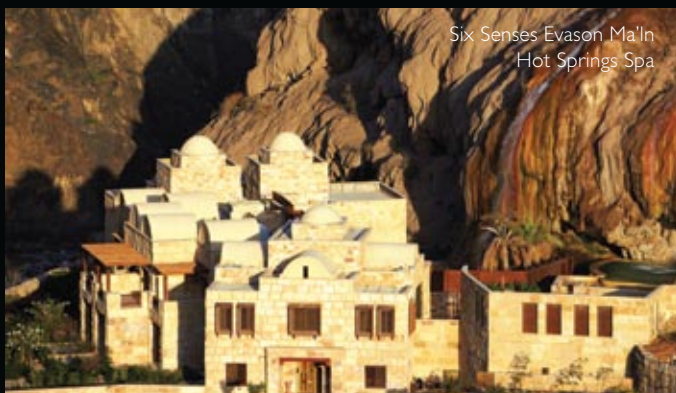
RESIDENT TRAVELER: UNDER THE JORDAN MOON

By Lisa Loverro

It's a sunny day at the lowest point on the Earth's surface, home to The Dead Sea. As I effortlessly float above its salty, blue waters staring at Israel across the way, I begin to realize how much I have come to love the Middle East. The warmth of its people and diversity of its landscape, combined with their ancient history and exotic cuisines are by far some of the most unique the world has to offer. Of course, the area is comprised of many different countries, some more westernized than others in both their attitudes and cultures. It's during this recent trip to the historical Kingdom of Jordan that I have become more determined than ever to change the perception of this region to those here in the States.

Jordan is filled with an incredible amount of history, most of it drawing from biblical times, specifically the Old Testament. While we have all read how Moses stood on Mount Nebo to view the Promised Land or parted the Red Sea (or whatever you tend to believe) it's not until you visit these sites that you can begin to understand their place in history.

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Six Senses Evason Ma'in
Hot Springs Spa



Kempinski Hotel Ishtar
Dead Sea

My first day arriving in Jordan was a visit to the ancient Roman city of Jerash, lying just north of their capital city of Amman. Consisting of Roman ruins dating back to 63 BC, Jerash was one of the greatest cities during the Roman Empire. I could have spent a full day here, mesmerized by Roman columns in the Middle East set in a field of flowers and green grass. While daydreaming as to what life was like during this time, I am quickly summoned by Ibrahim, my tour guide. “Yalla Yalla” he shouts over to me, a term I become familiar with during my trip. “Yalla Yalla” in Arabic translates to “let’s move it” or “hurry up,” a phrase I came to ignore, as I wanted to soak in every bit of beauty Jordan was offering up to me.

Next was a visit to Mount Nebo to view the Promised Land, but, alas, all I saw was a haze of a barren landscape in the distance...it made me wonder if Moses had a clear day! Religious groups from around the globe flock here, and on any given day you’ll more than likely come across groups praying or singing, creating a peaceful feeling throughout the site. It is said Moses is buried here but nobody really knows for sure. I’m not the most religious person so I was surprised that, while visiting the River Jordan where Jesus was baptized, my eyes swelled with tears and my emotions ran amuck. I guess all those “informative” years in Catholic grade school did not go to waste after all.

Beyond its biblical importance, Jordan is a kingdom filled with so many other treasures to behold. Where to begin? I guess I’ll start with the most impressive...Petra! One of the new Seven Wonders of the World and a UNESCO World Heritage site, this ancient Nabatean city dating back to the 6th century BC is completely carved into the red stone mountains towering over the area. To all you movie buffs, Petra was featured in the “Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade” installment. Walking almost one mile through a narrow passageway, Petra’s main “treasury” building is then revealed to you in all its glory. A few hundred steps straight up (almost 900 to be precise) will reveal the Monastery building. A tough climb but well worth the effort. A spiritual encounter to say the least, Petra is a must-visit while in Jordan.

Desert Delights

Then there’s Wadi Rum and the Bedouins. Wadi Rum, a protected area of stunning desert wilderness surrounded by sandstone rock formations, set the stage as a base for British officer, T.E. Lawrence, or “Lawrence of Arabia” as we all know him. Spending an evening with the Bedouins, dancing to the beat of their drums while consuming massive amounts of lamb and hummus, was something straight out of an Arabian movie scene. The stars were out, the Bedouin tents were prepared and I drifted off under the Jordan moon. A word to those who may be thinking about a trip...the desert can be an extremely cold and uncomfortable experience if not properly prepared so be sure to pack warm clothing.

Continuing on this magical mystery tour through the Jordan, I traveled to the middle of nowhere...literally. The trek to access the Fenyan Eco Lodge (www.fenyan.com) in the Dana Nature Reserve is a rugged one, but well worth the ride. Set in the wilderness of the desert landscape, this 26-room, high-end lodge was to be my home for the night. The entire lodge is lit with candles, reserving their solar-charged generators for only the restaurant’s kitchen and in-room bathrooms (an amenity I was quite pleased with). During the daylight hours, the lodge offers hiking, biking and visits to the Bedouin encampments; in the evening, dine by candlelight and star gaze on their outdoor rooftop lounge. This was to be one of the most memorable evenings while in Jordan. And oh yes, I did view a number of shooting stars!

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High Times at a Low Point

“Just lie back and experience the sea,” I’m told by the beach attendant at the Kempinski Hotel Ishtar Dead Sea (www.kempinski.com). Hesitantly, as I allow myself to fall back into the salty waters, the Sea cradles my surprisingly buoyant body. Comprised of 30% salt, (compared to 3% found in most oceans), I couldn’t sink if I tried. The area along the Dead Sea is lined with a few high-end resorts and spas. The Kempinski houses an Anantara Spa offering treatments from Body Scrubs to massages. I opted for a Dead Sea Salt Scrub. How could I refuse...this was the real deal! The same goes for the mud wraps, although you can coat your body with the stuff readily available in buckets on the beach and bake in the natural sun (an option I took advantage of). The Movenpick Hotel (www.movenpick-hotels.com), Marriott (www.marriott.com) and the newest addition, The Holiday Inn (www.ihotelsgroup.com) are all great options as well.

Some Like it Hot!

For a unique hot springs adventure, a must visit is the Six Senses Evason Ma’In Hot Springs Spa (www.sixsenses.com). An oasis in the middle of a barren mountain range, the resort sits at almost 1,000 feet below sea level with cascading waterfalls feeding into some of the hottest springs you’ll ever encounter. Just 8 miles from the earth’s lava bed, the waters of these springs can reach up to 125 degrees Fahrenheit...ouch! The resort itself is a luxury property with spa treatments utilizing resources from the mineral rich springs. A Saudi prince happened to be visiting during my visit, complete with man-servant massaging his feet as he dined at the resort’s exotic buffet. A sight I didn’t care to see while eating.

Sea Adventure

The town of Aqaba, a resort town in the far south of Jordan lies directly on the Red Sea and plays an important role as it’s the Country’s only seaport. Water sports, including diving and snorkeling are readily available as are high-end hotels such as the Movenpick (www.movenpick-hotels.com). During a day sailing out on the Sea I was able to view Egypt, Israel and Saudi Arabia simultaneously; an amazing sight to be had.

It’s hard to put into words the mystic of this Kingdom. It’s captivating and historic, filled with friendly people and delicious food. My evenings were spent dancing to Jordanian music and feasting on Middle Eastern cuisine. At the end of this journey, I was sad to leave but thankful to have experienced the magic and beauty which lies beneath the Jordan moon.



camels in Wadi-Rum



Jerash, photo by Jim Pitts

Feynan Eco Lodge

