

Ahlan Wa Sahlan: Welcome to Jordan

STORY & PHOTOS BY RON STERN | LA JOLLA TODAY

WHAT? YOU'RE GOING WHERE? THAT WAS THE TYPICAL reaction from well-meaning friends and family members who learned that I was headed to Jordan. Why, they wondered, would I go there given all the unrest in the Middle East? Good question.

The Jordanian people, as I discovered, are friendly and easygoing. The most common greeting I received was Welcome to Jordan, or Ahlan Wa Sahlan. Resort bookings are at an all-time high as millions flock to this land in search of lavish accommodations, wellness spas, healing waters, and the many historical sites that date from the time of Moses and the biblical prophets.

Even though no part of the world is immune from terrorism, considering the numbers of people that visit this country, it is remarkably safe. Up until very recently, they never really had a serious "incident" and Jordan is a strong partner with the United States and Israel in the



global war on terror. Signs of beefed-up security are everywhere and give the appearance of a king (King Abdullah) and country serious about protecting its visitors.

JERASH The first stop on my itinerary was Jerash, one of the best-preserved examples of Roman architecture in the world outside of Italy. Located 43 kilometers north of the capital of Amman, Jerash has been occupied for more than 6,500 years dating from Neolithic Age.

I walked past the Roman emperor Hadrian's Arch (built in A.D. 129) and entered the South Gate to the Oval Plaza. Ionic columns surround this area with two altars in the center and provide a nice spot for a few photos.

It takes almost three hours to see Jerash, including its colonnade streets, temples, churches, baths, and outdoor theaters. One of the highlights is the massive Hippodrome where, in ancient times, some 15,000 spectators watched chariot races and gladiator fights. Today, these scenes have been re-created and you can see charioteers racing against each other and Roman legions in full costume performing fighting maneuvers that made them the most feared army in the world.

THE DEAD SEA Believed to be the site of five biblical cities — Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, Zeboiim and Zoa — the Dead Sea, the lowest spot on earth, is now home to luxurious resorts and spas. I stayed at the Swiss-owned Movēnpick Resort and Spa, and from my room, I could

see beyond the waters of the sea all the way to Jericho and the mountains of Israel.

The high mineral content of the Dead Sea makes it impossible for a person to sink. Each day, people head to the waters to float on their backs and take in some sun, whose UV rays are less dangerous owing to the filtering effect of the evaporation constantly occurring and creating a mist that rises up from the water.

Another favorite thing to do here is to take some of the mineral-rich mud that is collected from the sea and slather it all over the body. Not one to miss a local custom, I scooped out some of the gooey, black mud from an urn on the beach and covered myself from head to toe. After letting it dry in the sun and then washing it off, my skin was silky and soft. It is believed that the waters and mud have healing properties and people with all sorts of skin afflictions such as psoriasis come here to gain relief. Some stay for weeks and swear by the healing power of the minerals.

THE LOST CITY OF PETRA The Nabataeans, an advanced civilization widely known in the region for its architecture and system of water canals, built Petra more than 2,000 years ago. By the 16th century, though, Petra slipped into obscurity for another 300 years until it was rediscovered in 1812 by a Swiss explorer.

My own previous knowledge of Petra was the temple known as the Treasury from one of the Indiana Jones movies. After walking through a narrow canyon known as the Siq, the Treasury appeared before me. It is a huge structure carved directly out of the red-hued sandstone. This, I was told, was just the beginning of Petra. This ancient city extends for miles past empty tombs, an amphitheater, and a large restaurant, and it culminates with over 900 steps leading up to the Monastery, the largest structure in Petra.

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IF YOU GO:

A few tips to help you plan your trip:

HILTON GARDEN INN, 148-18 134th Street, Jamaica, NY 11434, (718) 322 2648; www.hiltongardeninn.com

If you will be leaving out of JFK and would like to extend your NY visit, try The Hilton Garden Inn located close to the airport. I found that their staff was friendly and well trained; their rooms were clean and comfortable and their food was quite good for a small property.

TRAVELSMITH.COM Whether you are going to Jordan or any other location, I always pack clothing from TravelSmith. Most of what they offer — by way of men's and women's apparel is lightweight, wrinkle resistant and dries quickly. On this trip I particularly liked the explorer's Nylon Cargo Pants that performed well in hot weather and could be used for informal and semi-formal events.

PRIORITY PASS (www.prioritypass.com) Until recently, the only people who had access to plush airport lounges have been business class travelers and high flyers with lots of miles in their accounts. Not any more. For as little as a \$99 annual fee and \$24 per person, anyone can gain entry to over 450 airport lounges worldwide.