My Trip to Jordan

Whenever family and friends comment on my wanderlust, I'm compelled to remind them I've only been to 22 countries in my lifetime, and while that might seem like a high number to some it only constitutes about eleven percent of the world's total. I think what impresses people most is the *frequency* of my travels, having been to 18 countries in just the last seven years. My seniority at the United States Postal Service allows me five weeks of vacation leave annually, and I try to utilize as much of this time for world travel as I can. What I seldom explain to people is *why* I've chosen the countries I have visited. For the most part I've been narrowing my selection process to include one of two basic criteria. Global warming aside, the world is changing rapidly. There have been fundamental societal shifts in the past three decades, facilitated in no small part by new technologies that have connected the people of this planet like never before, modernizing and shrinking the world all at the same time. For this reason I've focused much of my recent travels on those emerging countries that are quickly transforming themselves via technology and modern industry. In other words, I want to experience these cultures before even the most rural of villages acquires WiFi. I must admit, though, it is becoming harder and harder to find such places.

The other basic consideration affecting my travel plans is a bit more drastic, based on dire geopolitical developments over the past fifteen years. Violent upheavals throughout Africa, the Middle East and Asia – much of it having to do with the Arab Spring uprisings and the toppling of dictatorships in the region – has created a political vacuum that in many instances has led to civil wars and forced heart-wrenching and brutal migrations. One of the most dangerous consequences has been the emergence of what is referred to as 'radicalized' Muslim extremism, a term now synonymous with global terrorism. It used to be that whenever I announced my next travel destination, family and friends would just frown, wondering aloud why I would prefer countries like Turkey, Guatemala and Nepal (all great places to visit, by the way) instead of the more traditional European sites. My cheeky response was always the same: "*Anyone* can go to France, but it takes *moxie*

to go to India!" And then terrorists attacked Paris in November of 2015, killing 130 people and injuring hundreds more. Suddenly, the concept of world travel had an ominous undertone, as if the lingering threat of violence – regardless of the destination – was par for the course.

The attacks in Paris came on the heels of the destruction of the Arch of Triumph, one of the most iconic structures in the ancient Roman city of Palmyra, Syria, by the terrorist group ISIS. The arch had stood for over 2,000 years. Truly, this was a crime against humanity, perpetuated for no other reason than vengeance and religious intolerance. In 2001, the Taliban did the same thing when they dynamited two massive Buddha statues from the 6th century in central Afghanistan. In fact, it's shocking just how many historical sites in the less developed parts of the world have already been subjected to systematic looting and destruction. In the Middle East and its surrounding regions, popular ancient historical landmarks – especially those with no direct religious bearing to Islam – have been increasingly targeted. Perhaps I'm being melodramatic here, I would like to think my fears are greatly exaggerated and that the civilized nations of the world will unite to prevent any further destruction to our global heritage. But just in case, my *second* determining factor in picking a travel destination centers on these great historical places. Simply, I wish to see as many of them as I can, while it is still safe to do so.

Which is why I chose to go to Jordan at this time, a small country with a treasure trove of historical sites – biblical landmarks, Roman ruins, Islamic and Crusader castles, and the amazing ancient city of Petra, carved into the red sandstone hillsides of the southwestern desert – but also facing a startling and growing refugee problem along its border with Syria and Iraq, a humanitarian crisis with the potential to spiral out of control, unleashing social unrest and instability in what is normally a very peaceful nation. I was both excited and a little nervous about seeing these places, given the current political environment. For my trip, I selected a nine-day tour offered by Gate 1 Travel, of which two of these days were spent traveling to and from the country. Because of Jordan's size – its land mass is slightly smaller than the state of Indiana – I felt a longer trip was not really necessary. Although, in retrospect, I would probably have chosen an extra day to visit the southern port of Aqaba, Jordan's only coastal city.

I was traveling during the end of winter and the weather was perfect, mostly 50 to 75 degrees Fahrenheit (a little warmer in the Wadi Rum desert

and by the Dead Sea area). I wore my usual collection of plaid shirts and nylon zip-off pants, with a hooded sweat jacket for the colder morning temperatures. And, as I always do, I registered my trip with the State Department under their Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (S.T.E.P.) just to let my government know I would be in the Middle East in case of any unforeseen emergencies. When you enroll, the State Department will send you travel advisories via email. These alerts can often seem scary, especially if you're getting them for the first time. Our government wants us to be safe abroad, but sometimes they bring this message home with a sledgehammer. Not that I wouldn't take their security alerts seriously, mind you, but I think common sense is the key. Remember, any reputable tour company will not put you in harm's way *deliberately*; if your trip goes through its because they do not foresee any major threats. Just be vigilant. As I've mentioned in my journals before, I wouldn't stroll through a high-crime area of Chicago anymore than I would in Cairo. So ask your tour guide for advise about safety and what places to visit on your own.

Incidentally, five days prior to leaving for Jordan, their military killed seven terrorists along the northern border with Syria who were planning to attack foreigners in Amman, the nation's capital. When I re-checked the State Department's website the security alert was frightening. As it turned out, though, Jordan proved to be *very* safe. We encountered no problems concerning our safety, venturing out to dinner in various places on our own. In fact, Jordanians are among the friendliest people I have ever met; everywhere we went they greeted us and seemed genuinely happy that we were there. So, spoiler alert: *I had a great time*!

On March 7th, 2016, I took a taxi to Miami International Airport and began my fascinating journey into the past…

Days One and Two

My taxi service dropped me off at the airport at 1:35pm, exactly three hours before my scheduled flight. I had booked my own airfare with

Lufthansa to ensure aisles seats on all the roundtrip segments of my air travel. Those of you who've read my previous journals know that I suffer from claustrophobia and need to sit in an aisles seat to prevent a full-blown panic attack. Although Gate 1 Travel offers excellent prices on their airfare they can't always guarantee the seat you want in advance. Certain airlines reserve this right when it comes to travel packages and only assign seats at the last minute. To quiet my anxieties I opted to book my own fare and secure my seat assignments prior to the trip. At the time, Lufthansa was advertising a sale on all their destinations so my travel costs were even cheaper, an unexpected bonus. I had already checked-in the previous night online and printed out my boarding pass. When I arrived at the airport I simply dropped off my luggage and headed over to my departure gate.

My flight left fifteen minutes late, at 4:50pm. I was flying into Frankfurt, Germany and then taking another flight to Amman. The plane was the impressive Airbus A380, a double-deck behemoth that is currently the largest commercial aircraft in the sky, capable of carrying between 554 and 853 passengers depending on how the cabins are configured. Not only is this jetliner huge, it has the quietest cabin space of anything flying today. I couldn't tell when we left the ground during take off, and the landing was so gentle I might as well been sipping hot coffee! The Airbus A380 also offers a slightly wider seat in economy, a blessing for a 250-pound guy like me. On the back of the seat in front of each passenger is a personal viewing screen, with a long list of movies, music albums and TV shows to choose from. I donned a pair of noise-reduction headsets, reclined my seat just enough to get comfortable and watched two movies back-to-back, the latest James Bond film, *Spectre*, and the equally thrilling *Mockingjay: Part Two*, the Hunger Games finale.

During the serving of our first meal I made a startling realization. I was given a set of stainless steel cutlery with my dinner tray, and as I released them from their plastic wrapping it suddenly dawned on me: *all six hundred passengers on this plane were now armed with serrated knives*. What a tactical security nightmare! But then I proceeded to cut the tiny chicken breast on my tray. It took me nearly a minute of sawing and pulling to finally rip away a small piece, which led to an equally disturbing thought: *these shitty knives couldn't slice butter if they came with oxyacetylene torches attached to them*! I relaxed and enjoyed my flight. The only uncomfortable thing about the trip was the temperature. *It was freezing*. I spent most of the flight bundled up beneath the mini-blanket on my seat. In

between the movies and meals, I also managed to sleep for about three hours. All in all, the nine and a half hours went by quickly. By comparison, the six-hour layover in Frankfurt felt like an eternity!

Our plane touched down in Germany just before 7:30am (their time) on Day Two of my trip. The airport at Frankfurt conjured up a special memory for me…and not a particularly pleasant one, at that. Four years earlier, while flying to Bulgaria for a tour of the Balkans, I had a similar layover here and got caught up in a strike by one of the Lufthansa unions. Dozens of connecting flights were cancelled, including mine, and I became part of a growing horde of stranded travelers. My luggage was lost in the process and I arrived a day late for the tour. The only silver lining was a couple from New Jersey – Ron and Anke Wilckens – who were stranded along with me. They were part of the same tour group and we became good friends, even traveling together to Iceland a couple of years later.

As I disembarked the aircraft through the boarding ramp I shivered uncontrollably, for the weather outside in Frankfurt was 28 degrees Fahrenheit, way too cold for a Miami boy like me. Suddenly, I missed the 'warmth' of the plane. To reach my connecting departure gate became a 45-minute odyssey, trekking from the Z concourse to the B concourse, which included a ride on the shuttle train to the Terminal One building and another long security-screening line. When I finally arrived at the gate I had five hours to kill before boarding time. It was so early my flight wasn't even listed yet on the departure boards. I made the most of it. I had a cup of coffee at the McDonald's nearby, reading complimentary copies of the international versions of the New York Times and USA Today. Next, I browsed the duty-free shops and store outlets in the terminal building. I washed up in the bathroom. I read some more. After all this I checked my watch…*threes hours to go*. Damn!

I was very tired, having slept only a few hours on the flight over, but I was afraid to take a nap lest I wake up and discover my plane had departed without me. So I sat in the departure area and waited. An hour later, my eyelids drooping, I set my smartphone alarm clock for 1:00pm (the scheduled boarding time for my flight) and prayed the thing wouldn't malfunction. I slipped the phone into my breast pocket and napped for an hour and a half, lying horizontally across three open seats in the lounge section. I awoke just as they were announcing the boarding process. The plane was a much older and smaller passenger jet with very narrow seats.

Luckily, the aircraft was not fully booked and I was able to sit by myself, relishing the extra room. There was no entertainment on this flight, which lasted about three and a half hours, and after they served lunch I fell asleep and didn't awake until our plane reached the Amman Queen Alia International Airport. We landed around 7:00pm local time.

I must mention that I acquired my love of 'world travel' while serving as a Peace Corps Volunteer in the Philippines during the 1980's. Back then the thrill of the adventure was *everything.*…all one needed was a backpack and an open-mind. I am in my mid-fifties now, and the adventurous allure of backpacking is nothing more than a distant memory for me. These days I need certain amenities when I travel, and not even a doting mother can pamper you more than a guided tour. They take care of all the details so that the only thing you need to do, basically, is to show up. Case in point: when I reached the immigration counters a middle-aged Jordanian man holding up a Gate 1 sign was waiting for me. He introduced himself in passable English but I could not understand his Arabic name. I had read online that the visa entry fee into Jordan was 40 JOD (Jordanian dinars), roughly $56 US. I had set aside this amount in my wallet prior to leaving Miami, but the tour representative told me to forget the money and asked me for my passport, instead. He proceeded to speak to one of the immigration officers on my behalf. This officer then asked me a few simple questions, stamped the visa into my passport and welcomed me to Jordan without charging me anything. Apparently, if you are entering the country using the services of a Jordanian tour company the entry fee is waived. I did not know this and assumed the Gate 1 man had just saved me $56. I later tipped him twenty bucks for his services and he thanked me profusely, as if I had just saved his home from foreclosure.

It took nearly forty minutes before my suitcase made its appearance on the luggage carousel; the whole while the memory of my previous lost luggage incident with Lufthansa kept dancing around in my head. I was prepared, though. Since that episode four years ago I have packed two sets of nylon clothing (pants, T-shirts and underwear) in my carry-on which serve as my 'contingency clothing' should my luggage ever get misplaced again. The reason for the nylon material is because it can be washed in a bathroom sink and dries within hours. Live and learn, my friends, live and learn. With luggage in tow, my newfound Jordanian friend escorted me outside the terminal building where a taxi van was waiting for me. He said his 'goodbyes' and I boarded the taxi. Because I had set up my own airfare I

was the only one in my tour group who had arrived at this hour. I sat in the front seat next to the driver for company, a young Palestinian man who barely spoke English. It was an awkward 50-minute drive to my hotel – and in the dark, no less – as we attempted to communicate with one another. Eventually, we both tired of the endeavor and concentrated on the task at hand: he on his driving, and me on straining to make out my surroundings in the night. It wasn't until we reached the outskirts of Amman, some twenty miles south of the airport, that I was able to see buildings and neighborhoods along the highway. My driver kept pointing out different hotels perched on hills in the distance and saying "five stars". It made me wonder about my hotel, the Marriott Amman. We arrived about fifteen minutes later and had to go through a security gate checkpoint that included an inspection of the undercarriage of the taxi for explosive devices.

The Marriott Amman is a modern high-rise hotel situated in the heart of the downtown area, not far from the historic *Jebel Amman* hill, one of the seven hillsides around which the city was originally built. Before I could walk into the lobby I had to go through another security checkpoint where my luggage was screened by an X-ray machine and my body scanned with a metal detector by a security officer. The staff was already expecting me at the front desk; I received warm smiles and numerous *'Welcome to Jordan, Mr. Rodriguez'*. I was handed a sealed envelope containing a note from Hazim, our tour guide, informing me that we would be meeting in the lobby at twelve noon the following day for our tour of Amman, it included his cell phone number and details about the breakfast buffet at the hotel. With my card key in hand, I went up to my room and spent the next hour unwinding in front of the TV watching the international BBC news channel. I set aside my clothes for the following day and took an over-the-counter sleep aid to help get a good night's rest. By 10:00pm, more than 24 hours after leaving Miami, I collapsed onto the comfortable king-size bed and slept gloriously.

Day Three

I got up once throughout the night – damn middle-aged prostate! – but went back to sleep immediately. My bedside alarm clock was set for 6:00am

(being an early riser back home) and I felt fully rested and refreshed when the buzzer finally went off. Considering that Jordan is six hours ahead of Eastern Standard Time (EST) I did not experience any significant jet lag on this trip and was able to adhere to a regular sleeping schedule. I made several cups of instant coffee using the provided electric kettle adjacent to the small fridge, and spent some time writing in my journal notebook. When the sun came up I took a look out my window but the view was not spectacular, mostly a section of the parking lot and some adjacent buildings. I did a forty-minute workout routine standing in front of the TV set with a contraption called the Body Gym, a collapsible plastic bar with a removable resistance band that can be stored easily inside a suitcase. Afterwards, I shaved, showered and dressed, going down for breakfast at 9:00am.

The hotel restaurant had a very nice breakfast buffet. Hazim suggested in his letter that we eat a hearty breakfast since we would not be stopping for lunch during our city tour. A guy as big as me doesn't have to be told *twice* to fill up! I had one of the chefs prepare me an omelet stuffed with smoked turkey, mushrooms, tomatoes and cheese. I sampled three different types of bread, loaded up on corned beef, chicken sausages, roasted potatoes, an assortment of dried apricots, dates and prunes, topping it all off with a small cup of yogurt. *Whew*. I wobbled back up to my room after all that. By 11:35am I went down to the lobby and met the rest of my tour group for the first time. There were only 18 of us. In addition to myself, the group consisted of:

Paul Zajac, from Marcy, NY; John McCabe, from Whitesboro, NY; Mary Anne Watson, Lake Mary, FL; traveling with her daughter, Kimberly Watson, from Minneapolis, MN; Sig and Susan Perlas, husband and wife from Hoffman Estates, IL; Thom and Nedra Porter, husband and wife from West Virginia; Mazhar and Sakina Rangwala, from Albany, NY; Gail and Steve Blau-Kalman, husband and wife from Lords Valley, PA; Greg and Maui (Mary) Okon, husband and wife from Cape Coral, FL; Mike and Teri Donohue, husband and wife from Jacksonville, FL; and Richard Schulz, from Bradenton, FL.

Our wonderful tour guide was Hazim (whose last name I will purposely omit from this journal). Our bus driver was a stout, jovial middle-aged man named Hussam. And accompanying us throughout the entire tour was a young, very friendly tourist policeman named Ahmad, who was quite popular among some of the women in the group…(I think it had something

to do with his swarthy good looks and dreamy eyes; *at least, according to Nedra and Mary Anne*). This was everyone. Only about five of us had gone directly to Jordan from the United States, on what was billed as the Classic Jordan tour, the others had arrived as part of an on-going tour that originated in either Israel or Dubai. Although I was meeting these people for the first time, some had already been traveling together for at least a week and knew each other quite well. They were a great bunch of travelers, and we bonded quickly in our small group setting.

From the lobby we proceeded to our bus and began a tour of the capital, taking a major street called Khalid Bin Al-Walid into the downtown area to visit the historic Citadel, our first stop of the day. It was difficult to map out our path because of the way the streets meandered around this very hilly city. Hazim told us that Amman has been under major construction for the past fifteen years, growing and becoming more congested yearly, with new roadways added to try and ease the insane traffic that often brings the capital to a crawl. To highlight how much the city has changed, it's only been a few years since the streets in the old downtown area were given names.

On our way to the Citadel, Hazim lectured us briefly on the history of Jordan and its capital. Throughout this journal I will include historical details gleamed from our guide and my own personal research to keep things informative. In addition to being a letter carrier, I also possess a History degree from Rutgers University, so, if for no other reason than to justify the money spent on my college education, I intend to bore you silly with historical facts. Consider yourself warned:

The country of Jordan is a small Arab kingdom situated on the east bank of the Jordan River, surrounded by Syria to the north, Iraq in the northeast, Saudi Arabia along its eastern and southern flanks, and Israel and the Palestinian territories to the west. While many would confuse Jordan with being in the Middle East, it is technically in Western Asia, a term that is rarely used these days, cradling a rift valley on the Asian Continent that includes the Dead Sea and the Jordan River. The country has a unique geographical makeup. Besides a 26-mile southern coastline in the Gulf of Aqaba that flows into the Red Sea, Jordan is primarily a land-locked nation. It is among one of the world's least forested areas (only 2% forest cover) with the eastern section mostly an arid plateau irrigated by the occasional oasis and seasonal streams. To the south is the fascinating Wadi Rum desert (which I will discuss in greater detail later in this journal). But to the west,

dropping into the Jordan Rift Valley, is a very fertile highland area of Mediterranean evergreens and arable lands. Most of the major cities can be found along the western parts of the country due to its fertile soil and relatively abundant rainfall. The highest point in the country is the Jabal Umm ad Dami, a mountain in the Wadi Rum region reaching more than 1800 meters above sea level, and the lowest point is the Dead Sea, currently 430 meters *below* sea level, making Jordan the lowest land point on earth.

Although modern day Jordan has only existed as an independent nation since 1946, its actual history dates back to the earliest developments of our species. Prior to Homo sapiens settling in the area, there is evidence of Homo erectus and Neanderthals living here. Paleolithic sites have been discovered all over the northern and eastern portions of the country, and one of the largest Neolithic communities in the Near East *('Ain Ghazal*) was established just outside Amman beginning around 7250 BC which lasted for more than two thousand years. In addition, archaeologists have uncovered villages near Aqaba, the Dead Sea and the Jordan Valley that date back to the Chalcolithic period (the Copper Period that predated the Bronze era).

Jordan's pre-historic period ended around 2000 BC when a Semitic-speaking nomadic people known as the Amorites entered the region from what is now Syria. They spread throughout the lands east of the Jordan River (what is referred to as the Transjordan), establishing three ancient kingdoms: *Ammon* (with its principle city, Rabbath Ammon, located where present-day Amman is); *Edom* (in the Wadi Rum region); and *Moab* (along the mountainous strip east of the Dead Sea). Much of the early history of the country centers on these three civilizations, which were constantly at war with the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah to the west; in fact, some of Israel's earliest records have been corroborated through inscribed accounts of these conflicts. And while these kingdoms held sway over the Transjordan, all three remained under the rule of a litany of distant empires that took turns dominating the region. A veritable Who's Who of ancient powerhouses, starting with the Akkadians, the Ancient Egyptians, the Hittites, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Achaemenid Empire (the First Persian Empire) and the Hellenistic Empire of Macedonia (under Alexander the Great). But it wasn't until around 63 BC that the people of these Transjordan kingdoms finally lost their ancient identities, becoming thoroughly assimilated into a new dominant culture, that of the mighty Roman Empire.

During the 7th Century AD, the Muslim conquest of the region by the *Rashidun* caliphate (the first four successors – or caliphs – of the prophet Muhammad) spread northward to Jordan. After the fall of the Byzantine Romans in 636 AD, Islam continued to spread quickly throughout the Middle East, Asia Minor and Africa. The Rashidun caliphate was succeeded by the Umayyad caliphate, a powerful dynasty hailing from Mecca. They ruled the Transjordan from 661 to 750, building several desert fortifications and a large administrative palace in Amman. The Umayyads were eventually replaced by two more caliphates (the Abbasid and the Fatimids) before the arrival of the Christian Crusaders in the 12th century, who established the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem, constructing several very impressive castles within the Transjordan (we saw the one at Karak on our way down to Petra).

The Crusaders reigned over the region for much of the 12th century until a new caliphate, the Ayyubids – ruled by the great Muslim conqueror, Saladin – expelled them from the Holy Lands. The Ayyubids built the first Islamic castle in Ajloun (which we visited the following day) modeled after the Crusader castles. The next group to control the area was the Mamluks, whose 256-year reign beginning in 1260 included the unpleasant task of repelling the Mongols from the region. The Turks, in turn, defeated the Mamluks in a decisive battle in 1516 and Transjordan was then officially annexed to the Ottoman Empire until the 20th century. I will discuss Jordan's independence and more modern history later in this journal. *Um, in case you're wondering, mid-term exams will be next week…*

The distance between the Marriott and the Citadel was not very far, but it took us more than thirty minutes due to the slow pace of the traffic. Along the way we witnessed the city's ebb and flow; government workers and laborers milling about, school kids being let out for lunch, mothers out shopping, vendors selling their wares. Amman, in fact, seemed like any other busy capital city; only the Arabic signs and the women's hijab (head covering) signaled that you were in a foreign country. Situated in north-central Jordan, Amman was historically built over seven hills but has expanded over the millenniums to include over a dozen more. Most streets in the capital derive their names from these hills or the valleys between them.

The eastern part of the city is considered the downtown area, or the historic quarter, containing the Citadel and other ancient ruins. The western parts of the city are the more modern areas (built from the 1920's onward),

and serve as the economic center for the country. Many international companies have regional offices here. Amman contains the royal palace and is the administrative seat of the country. The city is widely renowned for being one of the more liberal and Westernized Arab cities in the region, helping to make this a popular tourist destination. Currently, the population of Amman is just over four million, roughly 40% of the country's total, but that number continues to grow as the city expands into the outlying communities. Each year, more Jordanians – and other nationals living within the country – opt to settle in and around the capital for economic reasons. This, apparently, is where the jobs are.

We arrived at the Citadel after 12:30pm. Normally, the street leading up to the Citadel would be packed with tour buses, but the ongoing civil wars in neighboring Syria and Iraq have frightened many Western tourists and the site was relatively empty. This historical landmark is unique in that it contains the remnants of not one but *four* major civilizations all rolled into one. Perched on the highest hill in Amman – the *Jebel al-Qala'a* (850 meters above sea level) – it's not a coincidence that so many ancient peoples chose this spot to establish their respective cities. The elevation makes it a natural fortification point, and the panoramic views of the surrounding valley are phenomenal. No matter where you stood on the hill, the city of Amman, with its traditional white-colored buildings, stretched out for miles and miles in every direction, up and down the hilly terrain below. In one section – sticking prominently out of a seemingly urban swell – rose a tall pole with an enormous Jordanian flag.

Entering the site you'll see four monuments honoring the major civilizations that were established in or around Amman over the past several thousand years. The first settlement in the area was the Neolithic community known as *'Ain Ghazal*, dating as far back as 7250 BC. Artifacts from their culture are on display inside the Jordan Archaeological Museum located at the back of the site, including an amazing plaster twin human statue that is considered the oldest in recorded human history. The next civilization was *Rabbath-Ammon*, the principle city of the ancient Kingdom of Ammon, established around 1200BC, which thrived on and off during the Iron Age. Its storied past includes the biblical tale of King David's assault on the city, when many inhabitants were burned alive in brick kilns. In 1961, archaeologists discovered an inscribed white limestone block at the site (now referred to as the Ammon Citadel Inscription) dating to this kingdom; it is an early example of Phoenician writing and the oldest known reference

to the Ammonite language. During the time of *Rabbath-Ammon*, the city also came under the control of the Assyrians, Babylonians and the Persians.

In 331 BC, the Greeks conquered the city, further establishing its trading status. During the Hellenistic (Greek) Period that followed, Ptolemy II Philadelphus, the Macedonian ruler of Egypt – whose empire controlled the Tranjordan – renamed the city *Philadelphia* in his honor. Later, when the Romans incorporated the region, *Philadelphia* became part of the Decapolis (one of the ten great Greco-Roman cities in the eastern frontier of the Roman Empire). Under the Byzantine Empire that followed, *Philadelphia* experienced a strong Christian phase, which ended when the Muslim invasion arrived in the seventh century. Under the succeeding caliphates the city was called *Amman*, a name it has kept till this day. Amman's fortunes declined dramatically once the Byzantine Romans were defeated, but the city had a slight emergence during the reign of the Umayyad caliphs. Following the bloody Crusader battles of the Middle Ages the city pretty much slipped into anonymity until 1921 when Abdullah I, the new Hashemite ruler of the British-created Emirate of Transjordan, decided to make Amman the capital of his new state. Despite the glaring gaps in its history, though, this city's four major civilization periods – the Neolithic *'Ain Ghazal*, the ancient *Rabbath-Ammon* Kingdom, the Greco-Roman *Philadelphia* and the later Muslim *Amman* – have cemented its standing as one of the longest continuously inhabited places on the planet. And remnants of all four civilizations, in one form or another, can be observed at the Citadel today.

We spent just under an hour and a half at the site. Most of the visible ruins are from the Roman, Byzantine and Umayyad periods, with many more interesting artifacts inside the Citadel's museum. Seen from above, the site is shaped like the letter L. Hazim took us along the lower portion of this L, what is referred to as the lower Citadel, an area that probably served as an agora (public market) or forum just below the main ruins. He gave us a brief lecture on the four civilizations represented at the site and then led us to a cliff offering a wonderful view of the restored 6,000-seat Roman Theater, which is carved into the adjacent hillside below in the downtown area, a remarkable contrast of ancient and new, side-by-side. From here, Hazim took us up to the main ruins.

The first site we came upon were the remains of the Temple of Hercules, what was obviously an enormous structure back in its day. Built between

162-166 AD, this temple faced east and had six 33-foot columns lining its portico. Although only two of its columns remain intact – supporting a portion of an arch – it was still large enough that we were able to see it clearly when we were in the valley below visiting the Roman Theater later that afternoon. The temple measured 31 meters long and 26 meters wide, making it larger than most such structures (even by Rome's standards). Archaeologists believe that the absence of columns on one side of the temple indicate that it was left unfinished. Behind this temple were two pieces of what was once a colossal Roman statue (probably Hercules) that measured nearly 13 meters high. One section is of a humongous hand with curved fingers, it gave me the impression of a giant trying to crawl his way out of the ground.

The group split up at this point. Hazim gave us more than an hour to explore on our own. Most of us stopped first at the Jordan Archaeological Museum next to the Temple of Hercules. While not a large, modern museum, it nonetheless contained a fascinating collection of artifacts detailing the history of the country, and the Amman area in particular. There were flints and other tools and an assortment of pottery, ceremonial masks and statues dating back to Neolithic times, including the famous 8,000-plus year old twin statue of *'Ain Ghazal* (the oldest known statue in the world). You can also find remnants of the Jordanian Dead Sea Scrolls, ancient inscriptions, early Christian fish sculptures, Greco-Roman sculptures and statues, anthropoid coffins, a Mamluk copper cannon, medieval warrior uniforms, weapons from different periods and Christian mosaics from the Byzantine era. An incredible archaeological display for such a small museum.

After thirty minutes or so in the museum (it doesn't take much longer to see the whole thing), I joined Mike and Teri and we walked the rest of the Citadel. We saw the remains of the Byzantine Basilica, the Christian church built around the 5th or 6th century; it is mostly gone now, destroyed by earthquakes in the ensuing years. Some of the mosaic flooring is still visible in the nave, as well as a few columns and a portion of the semicircular apse. Heading just northward beyond the Basilica we reached the back area of the Citadel and came upon several structures built around 720 AD by the Muslim Umayyad Arabs. The most striking and reasonably intact building is the audience hall of the palace complex built for the Umayyad governor of Amman. Spanish archaeologist reconstructed a dome over the hall, which really makes the building stand out from its ruined surroundings. The hall

was basically a very large vestibule, designed to impress visitors to the palace; at first, I mistook it for a mosque. The actual Umayyad Mosque – built directly in front of this hall – has almost disappeared with the centuries. Beyond the hall are the remains of the governor's palace and other residential buildings. Just east of the audience hall is the Umayyad Cistern, a large and impressive stone-block circular hole that was constructed to supply water for the palace.

Finished with our tour of the Citadel, the three of us rendezvoused with the rest of the group near the site's entrance and re-boarded the bus. Slowly, we wound our way down the crowded streets of the Jebel al-Qala'a hillside and approached the downtown area, passing the arched entrance of the old royal palace along the way. Amman contains very few flat, straight roads, making sightseeing on foot here quite cumbersome. It's better to use the services of a taxi if you intend to get around on your own. With one exception: the downtown area, known locally as *il-balad*. The only way to really experience this place is by walking. Believe me, you'll be rewarded by a fascinating mix of history and culture.

We drove in a southeasterly path down Al-Malek Faisal Street, passing two unique *souqs* (marketplaces). To our left was a side street that led to Basman Street, an area known as the women's *souq*, lined with shops featuring embroidered dresses and, hold onto your senses, alleyways filled with risqué lingerie! Immediately across from the lingerie displays (on the other side of Al-Malek Faisal Street) is the famous gold *souq*, which, according to Hazim, was no coincidence. There is a long-standing joke about these two adjacent marketplaces: women buy the lingerie, and men, in turn, buy them gold. (Wink-wink). Not far from the gold souq was the *Souq Al-Sri Lankiyitat*, a small group of shops that cater to Amman's South Asian immigrant community, a good place to pick up spices such as curry.
Our bus let us off near Hashemi Street in the heart of the downtown area. On foot, we followed Hazim through this very busy avenue lined with storefronts, the roadway filled with such vehicular traffic that it appeared to be standing still. There was a sidewalk vendor selling lottery tickets across the street from the famous Al-Husseiny Mosque. I wondered if that was by design; you know, praying and gambling.

We stopped briefly in front of the Al-Husseiny Mosque so Hazim could tell us its history. Built in 1924 by King Abdullah I (over the site of a mosque dating back to the 7th century), this was the first mosque of what

later became the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. It was restored in 1987. I have seen a lot of impressive mosques in my day…*but this wasn't one of them*. From the side facing Hashemi Street are two minarets, and while the architecture was not overly inspiring, I guess the building did emit a grand charm if for no other reason than it was situated smack in the downtown area, surrounded by old, low level buildings. But what this mosque lacks in architectural splendor, it makes up for in social and political importance. This particular district is a popular meeting place for the locals. Both the mosque and the small square in front of it (along Hashemi Street) have been the site of large political gatherings, including a non-violent Arab Spring-type rally a few years back. The mosque, beyond its religious role, is a symbolic part of this relatively new country, and as such, holds a special place in the hearts of its countrymen, especially those living in Amman.

We slowly made our way through the fruit and vegetable souq adjacent to the mosque. The marketplace was full of shoppers, shielded from the sun by makeshift canvas awnings hung over the alleyways and side streets. We stopped in front of a banana vendor and someone in the group (I don't remember who) purchased enough for the whole group. We continued through the crowded marketplace, chewing on our bananas, passing stalls and shops offering a slice of Middle Eastern culture: Saudi dates, Syrian olives, a wide variety of grains and spices sold by weight right out of the sack, Iranian pistachios and other regional nuts roasted right there as you waited, flat bread bakeries and pastry stands. Just a block further south was the hardware souq (the best place to buy aluminum kettles and other kitchenware), perfume shops, spice and coffee shops, and the Arabic medicine stalls, marked by their dangling dried alligator skins and selling an unusual mix of dried herbs and henna. One of the most enjoyable experiences for me on foreign tours is visiting the public marketplaces. You can almost *feel* the culture of a people as they shop and bargain for the things they consume on a daily basis. A kaleidoscope of the senses: colorful fruits and produce competing with an equally vibrant blend of local costumes, unique languages and dialects, the titillating aroma of new spices and scents, and the wonderful tastes of new and exotic foods. To the uninitiated, the experience might seem randomly chaotic, but actually it is well organized and deeply rooted in centuries-old tradition.

We left the souqs and followed Quraysh Street northward on foot, passing the ruins of the Roman Nymphaeum built in 191 AD. It is almost impossible to imagine – from the remains of the Nymphaeum today – that

this was once a large, two-storey structure, an elaborate public fountain used to supply the city with water. Dedicated to the ancient Greek/Roman nymph deities (goddesses of nature), it contained stone carvings and mosaics, and possibly a 600 square meter swimming pool. Today, the site is still being excavated and restored, although currently there are only a few columns, an archway and some alcoves visible.

We reached Hashemi Street again, following it slightly eastward until we arrived at the Roman Theater, perhaps the city's most famous landmark. In front of the theater are rows of columns, the remains of *Philadelphia's* forum. Built in 190 AD, and at roughly 100 meters by 50 meters, this forum was one of the largest public squares in all of the Roman Empire. It was flanked on three sides by columns and on the fourth by a large stream which has since dried up. It is currently being excavated and restored (much of the forum still lies beneath the street). But the real showcase is the theater itself. Constructed during the second century AD under the reign of Antoninus Pius, the theater is cut into the northern side of a large hill and has a seating capacity of 6,000. Archaeologists and historians often use the seating capacity of these ancient theaters to gauge the size of the city's population. The general rule of thumb is to multiply by ten. In this case, Roman *Philadelphia* probably had a population in the vicinity of 60,000. A sizeable metropolis for its day. The small shrine at the top of the theater once contained a statue of the goddess Athena (it was removed and now resides in a museum somewhere).

Although the theater has been fully restored, non-original materials were sometimes used to fill in the gaps, so the actual restoration you see today is not entirely accurate. But this does not distract from the finished site. It is impressive by all accounts. Like most Roman theaters of its day, the *cavea* (the seating area) was built along a three tier concept: the ruling elite sat near the bottom, closest to the stage area, military personnel took up the middle rows, and way up in the nosebleed section was where the general public sat (fortunately, the construction of the amphitheater provided good acoustics). The theater was divided into three horizontal sections, and on either side of the large stage and orchestra areas were ground level entrances.

There are small museums on either side of the stage area. On the right-hand side is the *Folklore Museum* illustrating traditional Jordanian life (that's all I know since I didn't go inside); on the left is the *Museum of Popular Traditions* (which I did see) with an interesting display of

traditional costumes, facemasks and jewelry. There was also a room containing some excellent mosaic pieces excavated from the Roman city of Jerash. In order to protect the items on display, we were instructed by a group of chain-smoking door monitors not to take photographs inside the museum. I found it hard to believe that a camera flash could somehow be more detrimental to these delicate artifacts than the continuous plumes of cigarette smoke they endured on a daily basis. A 'rebellious' Kimberly decided she was going to take some clandestine pictures, so I positioned myself between her and the government workers to shield their view.

We spent the better part of thirty minutes at the site, viewing the museum and then climbing the stairway up into the theater itself to take photos. It's interesting to note that the theater is in full use these days; concerts are performed here during certain times of the year. Next to the Roman Theater is the restored 500-seat Odeon, which archaeologists believe may have contained a wooden roof or some kind of tent covering to shield performers and spectators from the sun and rain. Basically, the Odeon was a smaller version of the Roman Theater, its size probably more suitable for musical venues. Performances are also conducted there throughout the year.

Our sightseeing of the historic downtown quarter done for the day, we boarded our bus along Hashemi Street and headed back to our hotel, stopping along the way to visit a popular bakery called Anabtawi Sweets. Founded in 1983, with branches all over the Kingdom, Anabtawi Sweets produces some of the best Arab sweets and pastries I've ever tasted. A former traveling companion – Kathy Cunningham (who lives in California) – called me a few days before my trip to Jordan and told me about this place. She had taken the Israel-Jordan Tour the previous year and couldn't stop praising the delicious sweets. In fact, she made me promise to buy her two boxes of assorted mini pastries and ship them to her when I returned home. I didn't see what the big deal was until I tried several samples. *Mmmmmm*. Absolutely delightful. If any of my readers are interested in trying some you can purchase their products online; they ship all over the world. Anabtawi Sweets are internationally renowned, and while they make an entire line of cakes and ice cream, as well, they are famous for their mini pastries, which they sell by the box or tin. They melt in your mouth; delicious, light, flaky wheat pastries stuffed with pistachios or almonds, and moistened with a light covering of honey. I succumbed and purchased a small sampler box for myself plus the two boxes for Kathy.

Um, in the interest of honesty, let me just confess that not only did I eat my sampler box (later that evening before going to bed) but I also consumed Kathy's two boxes before the trip was through. I won't deny it; I'm a glutton. In my shameful defense, let ye not judge lest you've tried these sweets. One taste…*and it's every fat ass for himself!* (Sorry, Kathy).

From the bakeshop we headed back to our hotel, arriving around 4:45pm. I hurried to my room to wash up and make a cup of instant coffee. Thirty minutes later I went downstairs again for our official orientation meeting in one of the smaller conference rooms on the third floor. We sat around a series of tables set up like a large rectangle, with liquid refreshments in front of us, and took turns going around the room introducing ourselves. The orientation meeting is when you 'officially' meet your traveling companions, finding out where they're from and some little tidbits about their lives. Because I write these lengthy journals I always bring pad and pen and take down notes. Hazim went ahead and made name cards for us to wear that included the Arabic version of our first names.

When the preliminaries were through, Hazim once again welcomed us to Jordan and told us a little about himself. Married with three small children, and living not far from the hotel, he'd been a tour guide for nearly twenty years, fifteen of those with Gate 1 Travel. I thought he was an excellent tour guide. Attentive and polite, with a great sense of humor. He was not only knowledgeable about Jordanian history and culture, but also of the geo-political events shaping the Middle East and other parts of the world. One of his greatest gifts (I discovered throughout the tour) was his ability to explain historical facts and details in a clear, concise way without making the information sound boring. As a student of history I enjoyed listening to his brief lectures and his often-funny musings on everything Jordanian. As is customary at these orientation meetings he went over the tour's itinerary, telling us what we could expect and what to prepare for, and then reminded us of our 8:00 am departure to visit the Greco-Roman city of Jerash the following day.

Before the group split up for dinner (which was on our own that night) Hazim recommended a restaurant called *Tawaheen al-Hawa* near the Amman Mall in the center of the city about a ten-minute cab ride from our hotel. He said it was a very popular restaurant, great local cuisine at moderate prices. I had discussed the prospect of going with several of my fellow tour members. Steve, Gail, Mahzar and Sakina were all game. Most

of the other couples were either too tired or had purchased an optional dinner package at the hotel. I asked Richard Schulz if he wanted to tag along. He initially agreed but then later changed his mind when Paul, John, Greg and Maui said they would be willing to go to the restaurant the *following* evening. So I changed my plans, too, joining them for dinner at the *Il Terrazzo*, one of three restaurants inside the Marriott. Due to a miscommunication on my part, I neglected to inform Steve, Gail, Mahzar and Sakina – who were waiting in the lobby for me – that I had changed my plans. Hopefully, they didn't wait *too* long. If you're reading this, please accept my apologies.

I met Richard, Greg and Maui at *Il Terrazzo* around 7:00pm. The restaurant specialized in Italian cuisine. I had a green salad with sun-dried tomatoes and mozzarella cheese and a salmon dish. We spent the next hour and a half eating and getting to know each other better. Turns out, we were all from Florida (but not originally, which is usually the case with Floridians). We bonded like 'bosom buddies' for the rest of the tour, taking many of our meals together. During dinner we opened up and shared a lot of personal information about ourselves and I felt an immediate kindred spirit with them. An important aspect of any guided tour is the camaraderie that often develops between the members. I have met many fine people on my journeys, and this trip was no exception. By 8:30pm I was back in my room. I put aside some things to wear for the next day and set the alarm clock. Sitting on the bed, I flicked through the TV channels and found an interesting show on the Discovery Network. This was when I remembered the sampler box of Arab sweets I had purchased earlier that day. *Perhaps just one or two*, I thought, unwrapping the carton.

Around 9:30pm the empty box slipped from my fingers as I lapsed into a sugar induced coma. *No judging, please*.

Day Four

I awoke at 4:30am and immediately made coffee. I have a wicked caffeine addiction that requires at least three or four cups of Java Joe first thing in the morning. Whenever I travel, I always pack a two-week supply of instant coffee, creamer and sweetener packets in my suitcase, and bring along a water immersion heater to boil water in case the hotel does not provide a coffee kettle. I spent over an hour writing in my travel notebook, making sure I had included all of the details of the previous day's outing. After I return home and begin the long arduous process of writing my 'official journal' these morning notes become invaluable in helping me re-construct the trip. When I was done with my notebook entries I showered, shaved and dressed, heading downstairs for breakfast at 6:45am. That morning I sat with Sig and Susan.

By 8:00am we were assembled on the bus for a full day of sightseeing. On most guided tours there is a mandatory seat-rotation system that allows for an equitable distribution of seating assignments, giving everyone the opportunity to sit in the front of the bus. But on this tour it wasn't really necessary. With only 18 members – and so many empty seats – we pretty much sat wherever we wanted. For a tall guy like me, who needs the extra legroom, this was most welcomed. We began our trip that morning by traveling along a newly constructed roadway (Hazim told us it was called Jordan Street) a sort of perimeter road leading out of the city and hooking up with Route 35, also known as the King's Highway. We were heading towards the ancient Greco-Roman city of Jerash, about an hour's drive north of the capital. The scenery consisted mostly of green hilly terrain dotted with small villages in the distance, and, on occasion, a strip of trees that I guess passes for a forest in these parts.

One of the things I enjoy about tour bus rides are the interesting cultural tidbits and local facts the guides impart to break up the monotony, usually told with a mix of humor. As we left Amman, Hazim gave us a very amusing explanation on the concept of 'time' in Jordan. As was the case each morning while in the capital, we were stuck in heavy traffic and Hazim – in jest, I'm sure – mentioned that most of the drivers were government workers who were actually late for work. Of course, they blame their tardiness on the traffic. In a country with very little industry, such as this one, the largest employer tends to be the government, and while the pay is not very good at least it is a permanent job. Normal work hours for government employees are from 8:00am until 3:00pm. But much of that time, according to Hazim, is often wasted. Besides arriving late for work

each day (due to the traffic), there are extended coffee and cigarette breaks while the outdated computers reboot in the offices, followed by more coffee and cigarette breaks throughout the morning, followed by lunch, and then an early departure (to try and avoid the traffic home). Because government jobs pay so little, there is really no incentive to work hard.

The private sector is completely the opposite. They offer much better pay and benefits and demand punctuality and hard work. Hazim said the 'official' unemployment rate in Jordan was 14%, but in reality it was more like 23% when you factor in underemployment and the plight of the refugees in the country. In fact, it might actually be much higher now, which is a very scary thought considering the politically volatile nature of the region. And while no country relishes having one-fourth of its eligible working population *out-of-work*, I imagine this is especially true in the Middle East, where idleness can often lead to rebellion.

Hazim also spoke about the concept of time as it concerns social and family gatherings. When family or friends wish to visit, it is considered impolite to suggest a time frame. So if someone says they'll be stopping by 'tomorrow', it could be morning, noon or evening (unless they specify a certain *part* of the day, and even then they can show up at any time). Our guide told us that insisting on a specific time schedule implies you can only see your guests when it is convenient for you. A cultural no-no. He gave us a funny example concerning his own parents. In his culture the children are the ones who usually visit the parents, but on occasion his folks call to say they are coming over; social norms dictate that Hazim cannot refuse their request. Thus begins the waiting game, as he and his wife make preparations for the visit, which, if necessary, includes taking leave from work. At times his mother has called at the last minute, after they've been waiting for hours, to inform her son there has been a change in plans and the visit will have to be postponed until the following day. A rather frustrating turn of events because now the waiting process begins anew. For Americans, steeped in our time-conscious social protocols, this concept might be hard to grasp, if not downright infuriating. (Heck, if you're late for the tour bus you can get ostracized).

As we continued northward towards Jerash, Hazim gave us some current statistics on his country's population and economy. In addition to the roughly 6.9 million actual Jordanian citizens, there are approximately 4 million immigrants in the country. One million are migrant workers from

Egypt who can earn up to 3 times what they make in their own country. Between 1991 and 2003, the two wars in Iraq have forced one million Iraqis to resettle in Jordan. Surprisingly, a large number of these are Christians. Jordan's more liberal, pro-Western stance makes this country a sort of beacon for religious tolerance in the area. The largest group of foreigners living in Jordan comes from Syria, along the northern border. Since the start of the Syrian civil war in 2011, more than two million refugees have fled into Jordan, creating a massive social headache for the government. Recently, King Abdullah II addressed the United Nations and appealed for help in dealing with this problem, arguing that his country was on the brink, with over-crowded schools and insufficient infrastructure to cope with such a sudden influx of people. Not to mention the political tensions and social anxieties such conditions generate within the native population. Can you imagine the chaos that would ensue if over the next five years the population of the United States suddenly expanded by one-third? Well, this is the dilemma confronting tiny Jordan with its limited resources.

Amman is the economic center of the country, but Jordan does not have a large industrial base. Few foreign companies have set up factories here. Basically, the country runs on a local economy, supported by a large governmental workforce and supplemented in large part by phosphate mining in the desert, farming along the western regions, trade from the Port of Aqaba and tourism. Jordan also receives international aid (in recent years this has increased due to the refugee problem). Not long ago, according to Hazim, tourism accounted for 18% of the total GNP, but the civil wars in neighboring Syria and Iraq have kept many tourists away, especially North Americans who used to make up the bulk of the visiting population. This was evident everywhere we went. Many of the great historical sites we visited were relatively empty.

As we headed north towards the city of Jerash, driving through a broad and deep valley, we came across the shallow Zarqa River, the second largest tributary to the lower Jordan River. An amazing thing about traveling through this country is the unexpected history you will encounter, even in nature. The Zarqa River is a good example. Flowing and gradually cutting and meandering its way through this valley for nearly 30 million years now, its headwaters lie just northeast of Amman, and gave rise to the Neolithic settlement of '*Ain Ghazal* more than 8,000 years ago. During biblical times this river was referred to as the Jabbock, and was first mentioned in the Book of Genesis, mostly in relation to Jacob (and the feud he had with his

twin brother Esau). The Jabbock is mentioned several more times in the bible; several cities were built along this waterway, which served as a geographical border between early Israelite tribes and the Ancient Kingdom of Ammon.

During the seventies, the King Talal Dam was built across the Zarqa River to redirect and supply irrigation and drinking water to the region. Sadly, the Zarqa River today is so polluted – contaminated in turns by an overflow of untreated raw sewage and industrial waste runoff – it no longer provides drinking water for the cities east of the Jordan River, and is used primarily for irrigation purposes. There is a concerted effort on behalf of the Jordanian Ministry of the Environment to save the Zarqa River. *And so they should*. When we were there, Jordan was experiencing a severe draught that limited the amount of water most cities could access. According to Hazim, water is rationed for general use in Amman and is available only once a week, and just for a few hours a day; in the rural areas it's once every ten days. Most of the country's drinking water is purchased. Apparently, none of the rationing applies to the tourism hotels.

We reached the outskirts of modern Jerash by 9:00am. Situated 48 kilometers north of Amman, this city serves as the capital of the Jerash Governorate, the smallest of the 12 governorates (or provinces) within the country. The region has a relatively large population density due to its fertile valleys, which receive a respectable amount of rainfall annually, making it very suitable for agriculture. The hilly terrain here is filled with olive and fruit orchards, some of these trees dating back to Roman times. Alexander the Great founded the city, and later a large Greco-Roman city flourished here until the 8th century AD.

Modern-day Jerash has grown dramatically over the last one hundred years, with a large influx of Syrians and displaced peoples from Russia's Northern Caucasus settling in the valley during the first half of the 20th century. A wave of Palestinian refugees arrived between 1948 and 1967, many fleeing the turmoil in Israel and the Palestinian territories. Because of its close proximity to the country's largest cities (Amman, Zarqa and Irbid), Jerash has often lost out in terms of larger business investments, but its silver lining has been the Greco-Roman ruins, carefully preserved and protected, making Jerash the second most visited city (tourist-wise) after Petra.

It was a clear, sunny day when we finally arrived at the city's Greco-Roman ruins. The early morning hour meant we had the site to ourselves, as the parking lot was not yet filled with tour buses. The magnificent Arch of Hadrian – an impressive 11-meter high, three-arched gateway built to welcome the visiting Roman Emperor Hadrian – welcomes all to Jerash, separating the new, modern town from the ancient city. The arch was built in 129 AD and was originally twice as high as it is today, once containing massive wooden doors. The architectural carvings on the arch show acanthus bases (plant sculptures), and columns with capitals on the bottom not the top, an unusual feature attributed to the Nabataeans, an Arab people who established a kingdom in the region and were later conquered by the Romans. The Nabataeans were the ones who built Petra.

The distance between Hadrian's ceremonial arch and the *actual* main southern entrance into the ancient city is unusual, and seems to indicate the original planners had probably envisioned a much larger expansion for Jerash. By the time of the emperor's visit, Jerash was already a place of great wealth and importance within the eastern edges of the Roman Empire. Surprisingly, though, the city did not lie along an important trade route. So how could such a great metropolis come into existence? Well, the answer, in part, can be seen from the Arch of Hadrian. It overlooks the cultivated lands of the nearby *wadi* (a dry riverbed valley irrigated by heavy rainfall or from a seasonal stream). The rich soil surrounding Jerash has been – since ancient times – the lifeblood of the city. Plums, apples, figs, berries and, most importantly, olives, grow in abundance along the hillsides, providing not only sustenance for the local population, but bumper crops that permitted the residents to trade and prosper.

This is a spectacular site as far as archaeological ruins are concerned. The dry desert air has helped preserve this ancient city, known as *Gerasa* in Roman times. Walking down its stone-paved streets one can almost visualize how vibrant Jerash must have been back in its day. We stopped briefly to photograph ourselves in front of Hadrian's Arch and then began walking towards the South Gate entrance, the main entry point into the city. To our immediate left, built just outside the city's defensive walls, was the Hippodrome, constructed between the 1st and 3rd centuries AD. This rather long, bullet-shaped sports arena once seated 15,000 spectators, who would gather to cheer on the chariot races or athletic events. Today, the stadium (which can still sit about 500 people) is used for re-enactments. It was too early for us to witness the show, but I read it was quite entertaining;

Jordanian soldiers dressed as Roman legionnaires parade and perform ancient military drills, followed by mock gladiator fights and a chariot race.

Just opposite the Hippodrome, not far from the Arch of Hadrian, we passed the ruins of the small Church of Marianos, constructed during the Byzantine period in 570AD, much of its geometric-patterned mosaic floor still intact. Surrounding the church are scattered subterranean tombs from the 1st and 2nd centuries, what is referred to as the Southern Necropolis of Jerash. From the Hippodrome we walked roughly 200-meters until we reached the South Gate, one of four entrances into the city. Like the Arch of Hadrian, its columns have elaborately carved acanthus-leaf decorations. A stone wall once encircled Jerash that connected to these large gate entrances, and remnants of the wall are still visible today. We entered the ancient city underneath the South Gate's large central archway; there were two smaller pedestrian archways on each side of it, all three massive wooden doors gone now with the passage of time.

In front of the South Gate, on the left-hand side as we entered, are the re-constructed ruins of what was once a military barracks, and a small section with vendor stalls. Jerash apparently had several market areas, mostly facing the streets. As we walked northward towards the Oval Forum, Hazim pointed out the division of the city; just to the east of us would have been the residential areas. In and around the main city were the Roman temples (and later Christian churches), the amphitheater, the Hippodrome, the Nymphaeum, the marketplaces and shops, the government buildings and the places of learning. But the main population lived just outside its walled boundaries.

We now reached the Oval Forum, an impressive colonnaded plaza that connected the social and political aspects of the city. Surrounded by 56 unfluted Ionic columns and paved with limestone slabs that increase in size as they expand outward from the middle, the Oval Forum served as a central marketplace and connected the Cardo Maximus (the main street of the city) with the Temple of Zeus. It was in this plaza where the different classes of people converged and crossed paths daily. Whether it was the soldiers on their way to perform sentry duties or returning to their barracks, vendors setting up their stalls, the patricians on the way to the amphitheater to watch a show, the priests and the faithful heading to the temples to pray, or the lowly plebeians anxious to see the latest spectator event inside the Hippodrome, *all* had to pass through here on their way to wherever they

were going. Standing in this beautiful plaza, with just a little imagination, you could transport yourself back in time to the Roman Empire.

Just to the southwest of the Oval Forum is the Temple of Zeus, with the Vaulted Gallery (an arched passageway) underneath its lower courtyard. Although it appears to be a jumble of scattered ruins, on closer inspection the Vaulted Gallery contains wonderful remains of the three basic column designs – Ionic, Doric and Corinthian – exquisitely carved with acanthus leaves and images of grapes and pomegranates. The Temple of Zeus was built on the summit of a small hill, overlooking the Oval Forum, with a large monumental stairway leading up to it from the *temenos* (the sacred courtyard).

Leaving the Oval Forum we followed the Cardo Maximus northward toward the center of ancient Jerash. This Roman city had two streets, the Cardo Maximus (the 'heart' or main street) that ran from north to south, and the South Decumanus, the east-west axis road. Designed in a straight formation, and once lined with 500 columns (some have been reassembled since the 1960's), the Cardo Maximus was 800-meters long and represents a lasting tribute to the ingenuity of Roman engineering: two thousand years later and even the drainage system beneath the stone manhole covers are still functioning. *Unbelievable*!

As we walked up the Cardo Maximus, with ruts from ancient chariots and wagons evident in the original flagstones, we passed several interesting sites. On our left was the remains of the *macellum*, an indoor market building used to sell mostly provisions like fruits and vegetables. Beyond this we came across the Southern Tetrapylon, an ancient roundabout on the intersection where the Cardo Maximus and Southern Decumanus streets meet, with a four-pillared structure designed to separate the traffic flow. *Incredible*. The only thing missing was a STOP sign! Further up the road we witnessed the beautiful Nymphaeum, the two-storey, half-domed ornamental water fountain of Jerash, elaborately decorated and plastered, with marble slabs used in the front of the fountain, and seven carved lions' heads serving as spouts. This was the main water supply for the city. Not much further up the street was the public Western Baths, which now lie in ruins as a result of earthquake activity over the years. This Roman bath structure was one of the earliest examples of a dome atop a square building.

Just to the west of the Cardo Maximus were the ruins of the Temple of Artemis and various churches and religious temples. Because we had a long day ahead of us, Hazim suggested we return to the Oval Plaza at this point and visit the South Theater. We later had time to explore on our own before leaving the site. The South Theater was built just above the Temple of Zeus, around the end of the 1st century AD. It was originally a two-tiered amphitheater (only one level still remains) and had a seating capacity of 5,000. If you needed to find your seat, no problem, the aisles were marked in Greek numbers! What remains of the stage is very elaborately carved, and above it, as a backdrop, is a beautiful panoramic view of the ancient city. Like all the great Roman amphitheaters the acoustics were fantastic. Two retired members of the Jordanian military bagpipe band belt out tunes throughout the day standing in front of the stage. They also pose for pictures with tourists (and have a donations jar nearby).

So what happened to Jerash following the collapse of the Roman Empire? Well, the city continued to thrive for a while under the new occupiers – there are Umayyad ruins at the site – but in 749 AD a major earthquake struck along the continental rift that stretches from Turkey down to the southern reaches of Jordan, destroying large portions of the city. As was often the case after such disasters, the people believed this to be a bad omen and eventually abandoned the area. Over the ensuing centuries Jerash was reclaimed by the desert, hidden from view until a German explorer, Ulrich Jasper Seetzen, re-discovered the site in 1806. The excavations that followed also led to the return of villagers to the valley, and soon Jerash was on its way to becoming a vibrant city once again.

We left Jerash around 11:30am and headed west towards the city of Ajloun to visit its famous medieval Muslim castle. From the map I was using, oddly enough, it was impossible to pinpoint what road we were traveling on, but I believe it was Route 20. The ride to Ajloun took only about thirty minutes, during this time we were privy to some beautiful natural scenery. Just to the south of the Jerash ruins, situated over a group of rolling hills, is the Dibeen Forest Reserve, a small nature reserve (only 8.5 square kilometers) containing pine and oak trees. Although you wouldn't know it by looking at it, this tiny patch of forest is considered a hotbed of biodiversity in the region, a habitat to 17 endangered animals and several rare species of orchids. Centuries ago, forests like this one covered the entire northern section of Jordan, but now they constitute only about 1% of the total land mass. I'm assuming de-forestation wiped them out. As we

continued westward into the Ajloun Governorate we also came close to the Ajloun Forest Reserve, another patch of protected wilderness (roughly 13 square kilometers) home to some interesting flora (oak, carob, wild pistachio and strawberry trees, and the national flower of Jordan, the Black Iris) and fauna (wild boars, gray wolves, golden jackals, striped hyena and the Persian squirrel, among a few). The Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature (RSCN) manages all of Jordan's nature reserves. I read the society has an enthusiastic and dedicated bunch of park rangers who hail from the communities where they are assigned.

As we approached the town of Ajloun we traveled along a mountain road, circling a large farming valley below. In the distance, perched on a hilltop known as *'Auf Mountain*, stood the 12th century castle. Ajloun is located approximately 75 kilometers northwest of Amman; it serves as the capital of the Ajloun Governorate. Founded on an ancient market town, and boasting a 600-year old mosque, this hillside township is still a bustling, chaotic place filled with vendors and shoppers. The population within the Ajloun Governorate tops 150,000, comprising more than a dozen different tribes, of which at least four are Christian. It's interesting to note that while Christians are the minority in the region, they make up more than half of the population of Ajloun itself, living peacefully with their Muslim neighbors from the Al-Smadi tribe. To reach the castle, we had to drive through the heart of the town, the crowded, narrow streets winding up the mountain. Our bus parked a kilometer or so downhill from the castle; we boarded an old truck fitted with bench seats to take us to the entrance.

Ajloun Castle is also known as the Qala'at Ar-Rabad, a name derived from the suburb that developed along the trail leading to the castle, its origin coming from a prominent Christian family that still controls much of the agricultural lands around this vicinity today, the Al-Rabadis. This fortress is one of the earliest Muslim castles ever built, fashioned after the Crusader Castles. It was constructed between 1184-1188 – over the site of a former monastery – by Izz al-Din Usama, a nephew and a commander in the forces of the great conqueror Saladin who eventually expelled the Crusaders and established the Ayyubid dynasty centered in Egypt. Its location atop the mountain rendered a commanding view over the Jordan Valley and the three *wadis* leading into it, making it a formidable deterrence against any invading army.

Initially, the main purpose of Ajloun Castle was to countercheck two Crusader castles in the area: the Belvoir Fortress (situated across the Jordan Valley in what is now Israel, south of the Sea of Galilee) and the Karak Castle (in the town of Karak, 140 kilometers south of Amman). But Saladin had another purpose in mind, as well; he wanted to control the powerful Bedouin tribes in the area that had aided the Crusaders, knowing this would be crucial in his conquest of the Transjordan. The original castle built by the Ayyubids contained four corner towers, connected by defensive walls with built-in slits for archers, and a double gate surrounded by a moat. It was a standard design based on the castles constructed by the Crusaders, the only main difference was the shape of the arches. Later, in 1214, the castle was enlarged with a new gate and some more towers (eventually seven towers were constructed). After the fall of Karak Castle to the south, and the ouster of the Crusaders from the Transjordan, Ajloun Castle lost its military importance. It became more of an administrative and provisions building under succeeding caliphates, was destroyed by the Mongols and rebuilt by the Mamluks, and eventually overtaken by the Ottomans who posted a small garrison there before abandoning it altogether. By the time Swiss explorer Johann Ludwig Burckhardt (the same man who stumbled across Petra) found the castle in 1812, a family of forty people was using it as a dwelling. Subsequent earthquakes have since damaged the structure and the site is now slowly being restored.

We spent an hour here exploring the structure. The group split up, venturing throughout the castle's many staircases, chambers and towers. The front walls of the castle are one and a half meters thick, the entire structure seemed constructed out of both loose and cut stone blocks, on top of a rocky outcrop. A visitors' sign explained that a community of military personnel lived within the castle. The upper level of one of the towers served as a palace, where the leaders were housed, the soldiers (and their horses) would be confined to barracks on the lower levels. Provisions would have been stored below. A long dining hall was located on the third level. And there is also what appeared to be a prison or stockade. The castle had a school, renowned for teaching military economics. Perhaps the most striking thing about the Ajloun Castle was not even its construction, but rather its phenomenal vantage point overlooking the three valleys below. You could see friend and foe coming from miles away! Over the course of their reign, the Ayyubids created a chain of these hilltop positions that served as beacons and pigeon posts, enabling them to send messages from Damascus to Cairo in a single day. Very impressive.

Shortly after 1:00pm we re-boarded our bus and headed back to Jerash to have lunch before returning to Amman. On the way we passed beautiful orchards of almond and cherry trees, and several small towns like Sakib, whose inhabitants, the Ayasrah tribe, trace their lineage back to the Hashemite descendents of the Prophet Muhammad. The Ayasrah were instrumental in protecting Christian refugees in the 1800's. Hazim told me that Sakib currently has the highest birth rate in the country. I guess there isn't much else to do in these small farming communities at night. Back in Jerash, we ate lunch at a place called Artemas Restaurant. I opted for a light meal (or light for me) since a group of us were planning to eat a big dinner at the restaurant Hazim had recommended the night before in Amman. I ordered a cheese sandwich roll served with fries and a side of tomato and cucumber slices. (By the way, the tastiest fries I've ever eaten have been in Jordan; I think it's because they use olive oil in the fryer).

Most of us nodded off on the hour-long drive back to Amman. *I know I did*. We arrived at the Marriott just after 4:00pm. I discovered that housekeeping had neglected to clean my room and I went down to the lobby to complain. Within minutes a three-man crew was dispatched. I waited in the corridor as they made my room in record time. When they were through I washed up and made a cup of instant coffee and spent nearly an hour jotting down notes in my journal. At 6:00pm I went to the lobby to meet Greg, Maui, Richard, Paul and John for dinner. I had written the name of the restaurant, *Tawaheen al Hawa*, on a piece of paper, giving it to the concierge and instructing him to secure two taxis for us. Paul, John and myself got into the first taxi. The concierge gave instructions to the driver in Arabic. We would all meet in front of the restaurant. A simple plan. Our cab took off into the night traffic…*and we never saw Greg, Maui or Richard again until we returned to the hotel several hours later!*

I sat in the front of the taxi and regretted it almost immediately. It was Thursday evening, just prior to the start of the Muslim weekend, which is technically Friday and Saturday (Sunday being the first day of the week), so the streets were even more crowded as festive throngs set out for a night on the town. I couldn't get the seat belt to buckle properly, and as our driver zipped in and out of traffic – with all the gentleness of an Indy stock car race – I had to lock my arms against the dashboard and pray. We followed a major thoroughfare to the center of the city and then took several (I'm guessing here) short cuts through side streets before emerging along a busy

commercial boulevard known as Wasfi Al Tall Street, not far from the Amman Mall. Stores and restaurants lined the avenues here, teeming with customers. We pulled up to the restaurant. The concierge had told me that the fare would be 6 dinars, or two dinars apiece, but the driver insisted on 8 dinars when we arrived. I protested momentarily but then paid the fare and we got out of the cab and waited in front of the restaurant for our companions to show up.

We waited and waited. Fifteen minutes later we thought that perhaps they had somehow arrived before us, so I went inside and looked around. The restaurant's first floor was packed with locals. No sign of Greg, Maui or Richard (or *any* foreigners, for that matter). There was no way for us to contact them, either, since we hadn't bothered to exchange cell phone numbers. I mean, how difficult is it for one taxi to follow another? After waiting outside for another five minutes the three of us decided to go inside and have dinner. I told the front staff that we were expecting three more people, and they nodded. Actually, I don't think they understood English. We were escorted to an elevator and sent to the second floor (this was quite a restaurant) where we sat at an enormous round table with a sunken center. The staff added more chairs in case the others showed up. I glanced around the second-floor dining hall at the groups of large families (some were passing the hookah around in between courses), and, again, we were the only foreigners there. I took this to be a positive sign; it meant the restaurant was a local favorite, so the food had to be very good.

The menus were in English and Arabic, but the staff seemed to have a problem understanding us, so the maitre'd, a jovial middle-aged man who spoke broken English, took our order. We weren't really sure what to have, unfamiliar with the local cuisine (Hazim had mentioned the *mansaf*, a traditional Arab dish made of lamb cooked in a sauce of fermented dried yogurt and served over rice or bulgur) and there were a few curious items on the menu, such as *sheep balls*! We hemmed and hawed for so long the maitre'd decided to weigh in, offering a suggestion. How about a typical multi-course Jordanian mixed grill for three people? We agreed…and what a feast it turned out to be!

We started the meal with a series of appetizers, including *hummus* and a Greek salad that Paul and I ordered separately. The staff kept placing bowls in the middle of the table with *falafel*, fresh vegetables like carrots, tomatoes and lettuce, an assortment of very big olives, cheese-filled turnovers, a

delicious smoky-flavored *mutabel* (a pureed eggplant dish similar to babaganoush), a yogurt-spinach dipping sauce and a mound of freshly baked pita and flat breads. We washed this down with refreshing mint lemonade. Next, the grilled meat platter arrived. An over-sized silver tray filled with kebabs of grilled chicken, beef and lamb, over a bed of French fries and roasted hot peppers and topped with what looked like tortilla wraps. As we sat in our chairs trying to digest this meal, the staff brought over a large plate stacked with fresh apples, oranges and bananas, and this was followed by a tray of exquisite Arab sweets, an assortment of flaky pastries. I was too stuffed to order coffee! Throughout dinner we shared stories about ourselves, our jobs and travels, and discussed the possible reasons why our companions had not shown up. We hoped it was nothing serious, like a car accident (the ride over did little to dissuade us from that notion).

The bill for all this food came to 52 dinars, and we added another 20% for the tip, so the meal ended up costing us 21 dinars apiece, or just under $30 US. I thought it was a bargain. The food was delicious, and the service was wonderful. Once the courses arrived the staff was constantly hovering around making sure our plates were full or to assist us in any way. We headed back to the Marriott some time after 8:00pm, negotiating our fare (8 dinars) with a private driver just outside the restaurant. This was not an official taxi, but since the staff at the hotel flagged him down we assumed it was okay to ride with him. Later, as we drove through the incredibly congested streets of the commercial district, our driver made what seemed to us like some suspicious detours and short cuts through very narrow and isolated back streets. For a brief moment the thought that we might be in trouble flashed through my mind (read: kidnapped). But his street-wise maneuvering paid off and we arrived at the hotel in no time. Waiting for us in the lobby were Greg, Maui and Richard: *safe and sound*! We laughed and shared our separate dinner exploits. Apparently, their taxi driver had taken them to a different restaurant not far from where we ate. It's possible the driver got the name of the restaurant mixed-up, but Hazim later told us it is also possible that the driver was paid a bonus to bring tourists to a specific place. Either way, Greg, Maui and Richard said the restaurant was very nice and they shared a similar multi-course grilled dinner.

I made it up to my room shortly after 9:00pm and made a cup of coffee, writing down the night's events in my journal. I fell asleep watching the CNN international news broadcast on TV.

Day Five

I awoke at 4:00am, still feeling sluggish from last night's heavy meal. After my morning coffee I stretched and exercised with my Body Gym for forty minutes before shaving and showering. By 6:30am I went downstairs for breakfast, opting for a light fare (it felt like I had gained five pounds already on this trip). By 8:00am we were on the bus for our daylong drive to Petra, making several stops along the way.

Driving south out of the city we passed through the Zahran District of Amman, a section of very wealthy residential neighborhoods (the homes here cost millions). This high-end zone also contains more than three-dozen embassies, mostly housed in mansion-like compounds. Some of the ones we saw included the Saudi Arabian, Iraqi, Turkish, Russian and Iranian embassies. We also drove by the US embassy, but you would be hard-pressed to identify this fortress-like structure just from looking at it; for security purposes, the building's location cannot be listed on city maps. In fact, security is so tight around our own embassy that we could not even photograph it. Hazim warned us our bus would be stopped and cameras confiscated if we took pictures. I've experienced this in other countries, as well. You know, I *love* my country, but it doesn't speak well for our foreign policy-making if we have to hide our embassies even in countries we consider allies; besides, *everyone* in Jordan knows where our embassy is, so I'm not sure who it is they're fooling.

Excuse my druthers, but since the events of 9/11 Americans have, for the most part, come to view Arab and Muslim countries through the awful specter of terrorist acts, fueling our suspicions and fears about the region. But this would be like judging and avoiding America because of our high-crime areas. Case in point: during my weeklong stay in Jordan, nobody was murdered in the capital; by comparison, during my weeklong stay in Washington, DC in 2009, there were 21 gang-related homicides! Would you blame a foreigner for looking at *our* gun-crazy culture and being afraid of *us*? I try to keep things in perspective and avoid living in fear; as a result,

I've visited four countries in this part of the world since 9/11 and I've discovered that Arabs – and Muslims in general – tend to be very friendly people. I'm not naïve, I understand that the objectives of many governments in this region are not aligned with ours, but the *common folk* share the same concerns over family, education, economic opportunities and their future that we do. In fact, the more I travel, the more everyone seems the same. Frankly, it's one of the reasons I *keep* traveling; it inspires me to think positively about this planet, and that regardless of our current problems and disagreements the hope for humankind's future lies buried somewhere within our common ground. *We just need the foresight and courage to dig it up*!

While in the Zahran District we crossed the Wadi Abdoun Bridge, the country's only suspension bridge, and one of the coolest ones I've ever seen. The structure is not very long – extending only 134-meters over a dry riverbed – but it was constructed with two curves and held in place by three Y-shaped towers connected by thick cables. The bridge was quite costly (the Indian company that built it lost money on the venture), and Hazim said many people in Amman thought it was unnecessary to build such an elaborate structure over such a short distance, but the engineering design did win some international recognition. When I first arrived in Amman, driving over this brightly lit bridge at night felt almost surreal, with its twisting and turning roadway and weird tower angles. It made quite an impression on me, regardless of its size. After crossing the bridge we continued further south, eventually exiting the city limits and hooking up with Route 35, known as the King's Highway, along the famed ancient caravan route that Moses once used to lead his people to the Promised Land. We turned slightly to the west now, traveling through more hilly terrain – some of it cultivated – on our way to visit the historical town of Madaba, situated within the central highlands.

On the drive, Hazim was on the mike again, discussing the political organization of his country. (I will discuss the events that led to Jordan's independence when I talk about the Wadi Rum later in this journal). Officially, the nation is known as the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, its government is a constitutional monarchy and traces its royal lineage back to the Prophet Muhammad. King Abdullah II is the current monarch; he ascended the throne in 1999 after the death of his father, King Hussein. Although the constitution calls for a parliament, almost all of the power lies with the king, who makes the final decisions. The parliament consists of two

chambers: the Senate and the House of Representatives. The king appoints all 75 members of the Senate, usually from veteran politicians. The House of Representatives has 130 members, of which 108 are elected among the 12 governorates, and 27 are appointed every four years through a system based on the representative strengths of the political parties. Jordan has multiple political parties, but they usually only make up a fifth of the elected total, with many independents winning seats in the government. It's interesting to note there are quotas for the House of Representatives; currently, a *minimum* of 15 seats have to be held by woman, and 9 seats have to be held by the Christian minority. Woman candidates have actually won more seats than this, which illustrates the progressive nature of the country. Or, at least, as compared to some of its neighbors.

Jordan's constitution was adopted in 1952, but has been amended several times since then. The Arab Spring uprisings that began in Tunisia and have toppled several dictatorships in the region since 2009 have been a real wake-up call for the monarchies of the Middle East. The prevailing sentiment was that people were finally tiring of absolute rulers – specifically corrupt and brutal ones – and to head off the impasse many of the remaining Muslim monarchs began to implement political reforms, but always with an eye on controlling the situation on the ground. In 2012, a new law was passed in Jordan that put all political parties under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of the Interior, and forbade the formation of political parties based on religion, a move I'm sure was meant to curb the growth of religious fanaticism within the country.

The constitution supposedly guarantees the independence of the judicial branch, but earlier this year amendments were made to the Jordanian constitution that gave even *more* sweeping powers to the king. Basically, the king appoints all of the important positions within the government, including the military, and can dismiss the prime minister and the parliament whenever he wants, something that's been done in the past. But while rallies against the monarchy system in Jordan have popped up on occasion, they've been short-lived in duration. Why? According to Hazim, Jordanians look at the hell unleashed in Yemen, Iraq, Syria, Egypt and Libya following their popular uprisings and worry this could happen here, as well. Besides, *democracy* isn't always a one-size-fits-all concept, regardless of what Americans might think. In the U.S., we've had almost 250 years to perfect our system. Does anyone believe our *initial* method of electing leaders was just, when only white, land-owning males could vote? Real democracy is a

growing process; like a child who needs constant nurturing. Americans sometimes have a hard time understanding the notion that not all cultures embrace our love of democratic principles, that, in fact, there are societies where the concept of 'individual rights' often goes against cultural norms. In Jordan, for example, a country of *tribal* clans, problems are often resolved through negotiations between or amongst these groups. And who better to arbitrate than the king, a man who is familiar with all the parties involved? Many Jordanians, according to Hazim, might view the government as slow and archaic, but at least it's predictable and things somehow get done.

Hazim also mentioned that under King Abdullah II and his father, the former King Hussein, the country has grown substantially, and not just in terms of its economy and infrastructure. Reforms – some championed by Queen Noor, the popular fourth wife of King Hussein – have profoundly and positively impacted the rights of women, the disabled and the Bedouins in his country. He spoke fondly of his former queen – an American by birth who resides now in the U.S. where her children go to school – and recalled meeting her when she visited Petra for an interview special with Barbara Walters.

Petra, for its part, has been instrumental in launching Jordan's growth these past thirty years. In 1985, UNESCO listed the ancient city of Petra as a World Heritage site. Soon after, the Bedouins living in the caves of Petra were relocated to a new village in anticipation of the tourism boom that followed. But it wasn't until the 1987 release of *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* – the third installment in the hit movie series – that tourism took off. Petra was featured in the film's final scenes, sparking the curiosity of the West. Ever since, travelers have ventured to Jordan to see the ruins. But tourism *really* skyrocketed, according to Hazim, after Petra was voted one of the *Seven New Wonders of the World* in 2007, accounting for nearly one-fifth of the total GNP over the next several years. Sadly, the start of the civil war in Syria in 2011, and the subsequent rise of the new terrorist group ISIS, has stoked international fears, forcing the tourism industry to decline markedly.

Less than an hour after leaving Amman we reached the town of Madaba and continued northwest for another 7 kilometers to visit Mt. Nebo. Located on a high ridge, Mt. Nebo is the site where, according to Deuteronomy (32:49-50), Moses stood and viewed the Promised Land just before dying. His body is believed to be buried in the area, but the location remains a

mystery. Mt. Nebo is part of a mountain range that runs along the Jordan Valley's border with Israel. Rising almost majestically out of the Belqa plateau, the mountain's highest crest is roughly 1000 meters above the plateau and renders a panoramic view in any direction. To the north is the Wadi en-Nami and beyond it the Wadi 'Uyun Musa, to the south is the Wadi Judeideh, to the east the Wadi Afrit. But the real point of (religious) interest lies on its western peak, a 700-meter high ridge known locally as *Syagha*, because this is the spot – according to Jewish and Christian tradition – where God led Moses to view the Promised Land. *And what an amazing sight it was*.

We walked from the entrance up to the *Syagha* peak, stopping along the way to admire the wonderful valley scenery. A stone monument on the trail commemorates the Church (or Basilica) of Moses, which sits atop the peak, and the area in general as a Christian Holy Place, administered by the Franciscan Order that somehow managed to buy this site back in 1932, and have been responsible for much of the basilica's excavation and restoration. The Church of Moses was built in 597 AD on top of the foundation of a previous church from the 4th century. The modest building was abandoned in the 1500s and only re-discovered in 1933 by using travelogues written during the 4th and 5th century by Christians making the pilgrimage to the Holy Land. The location of these early Christian churches has been instrumental in pinpointing biblical spots, since many were built to honor specific events from the Bible. Of course, no one can say for sure if this was *the* spot that Moses stood to view the Promised Land, but according to the description of the area from both Christian and Hebrew religious verses, it fits perfectly.

The basilica is actually part of a functioning monastery (we met a jovial Irish monk from Boston when we were there) and as such, it is off-limits to the general public. A small olive tree planted by Pope John Paul II in 2000 still grows just outside the front gates. Restoration work on the basilica is ongoing – much of it, according to Hazim, proceeding at a glacial pace. We stopped to view an outdoor sign with a picture of one of the fascinating mosaics covering the floor inside the church, an intricate, incredibly well preserved section depicting what appears to be a hunting/herding scene with an assortment of African fauna. Although we could not visit the church, a tent-covered work area nearby allows visitors to see how large mosaic pieces from neighboring towns are restored.

The star attraction here is undoubtedly the Memorial viewpoint, a concrete and stone platform overlooking the western ridge of Mt. Nebo. My initial reaction was similar to when I saw the Grand Canyon for the first time; I stood in awed silence for a moment, admiring the beautiful panorama. But then slowly the historical and religious implications of what I was seeing began to take hold of my thoughts… and I stood in awed silence, *again*. A remarkable experience. The site offers a unique natural balcony from where one can get an almost aerial view of the Holy Land and the southwestern parts of Jordan. On very clear days, looking out across the Jordan valley – beyond lush greenery juxtaposed next to the arid desert landscape – you can see parts of Jerusalem (from the Mount of Olives all the way to Ramallah), Gilead, Judah, Jericho, the Negev desert and the Dead Sea. On very, very clear days you can even glimpse Bethlehem and the top structure of Herod's fortress of Herodium. A visitors' marker on the edge of the platform has arrows pointing in the direction of these locations; otherwise, it would be impossible, at this distance, for the uninitiated to know what they were actually viewing. In front of the Church of Moses is an interesting Italian-designed memorial, a bronze cross-shaped monument with twisting ironwork around its base and a metallic snake-like coil at its top, symbolizing the suffering of Jesus on the Cross and the snake that Moses turned to bronze while in the desert.

From here, Hazim led us to the small museum located not far from the church and gave us time to explore on our own and take pictures. The museum contained several excellent mosaic pieces and some Roman milestones used along the ancient pilgrimage path leading to the sanctuary of Moses. Thirty minutes later we rendezvoused on the bus, heading towards Madaba. On the way we made an hour-long stop to visit the Madaba Arts and Handicraft Center located just outside the town. There are several of these workshops in the area, many were originally funded by the Noor al Hussein Foundation (created by the former Queen) for the purpose of training local artisans on the craft of mosaic-making. The place we visited specialized in training locally disabled individuals in this art form. The head of the workshop is a skilled artist and paraplegic who gave us a demonstration on how mosaics are made; several artisans, including a young, disabled woman, were busy creating individual pieces, which are later sold inside the adjacent over-sized showroom.

Hazim told us that prior to Queen Noor's foundation, disabled people in Jordan were largely neglected, usually kept at home out of the public's eye.

But now, workshops like this one have provided them with a sense of purpose, helping them earn a living and giving them respectability within their communities. The effort that goes into creating an exquisite mosaic art piece is very time-consuming. The artist must first sketch the outline of his design on a canvas, and then slowly re-construct this image using a variety of different sized, naturally-cut stones, fitting and setting them into place one at a time. The more detailed the design, the harder and more labor-intensive the project. Each mosaic is formed upside down on the canvas drawing. No paint is involved, since the colors are derived from the natural color of the stones used. Once the piece is created, it is glued, set and dried and the bottom is cemented for a permanent bond. Finally, the work is polished and mounted (depending on its use). On the walls were many samples of completed mosaics. We went from worktable to worktable, watching these artisans in action, most were hunched over their artwork, some with fixed magnifying glasses in front of them, gingerly fitting stones into place. You get a much better appreciation for this art form once you see how it is made.

We were given time to shop in the showroom next door. In the past, I used to load up on souvenirs from my trips, but now I limit my purchases to one or two items that are representative of the country I'm visiting. Besides reducing my overall travel costs and easing the weight of my luggage, my apartment back home is not very big, and souvenir space is limited. I opted to purchase a small mosaic artwork (with a Tree of Life design) to hang on my wall. After some haggling (*ya gotta haggle*, *folks*!) I was able to buy the piece for roughly $60. I believe everyone found something they liked. Mike and Teri definitely bought the nicest item; a large, superbly crafted, intricately detailed mosaic table with a pattern similar to the one inside the Church of Moses (the hunters, herders, African fauna, etc). It was a stunning work of art. As tacky as this sounds, I couldn't resist and asked Mike how much it cost. Um, it was considerably more than my little souvenir. They had it shipped to Jacksonville (I believe the artist signed the bottom of the table…and come to think of it, so did Hazim).

From the mosaic workshop we traveled a couple more kilometers to Madaba. Driving through the town we passed a roundabout displaying the model of an F-4 jet. According to Hazim, this monument honors a local military pilot who died diverting his plane during engine trouble, saving the lives of people on the ground. His co-pilot survived the crash, but in 2015 was shot down while flying a combat mission in Syria and was captured by ISIS and later burned alive. The incident sparked international outrage.

Hussam parked the bus behind the famous Haret Jdoudna Restaurant and we walked through this historic eatery – built inside one of Madaba's oldest restored houses – on our way to Talal Street. Hazim led us on a short walk through the neighborhood to visit the St. George's Church. The history of the town is fascinating. This region has been inhabited for nearly 4,500 years. It is situated along the King's Highway, a trail that has connected the communities of the central highlands and its wadis (valleys) since ancient times, once serving as part of the caravan trade route. Madaba became one of the early towns divided among the 12 tribes of Israel during the Exodus, passing cultural hands numerous times, from the Ammonites to the Israelites, from the Nabataeans to the Romans, becoming a prosperous provincial town even through the Christian Byzantine period when many of its churches, with their lavish mosaics, were first built. Following the devastating earthquake of 747 AD, Madaba was abandoned for more than eleven centuries until the late 1800's when a large group of Christians from the former crusader town of Karak re-settled here following violent clashes with that city's Muslim population. These Christians, whose descendents still reside in the town today, discovered the historic mosaics of the former churches when they began digging foundations for their new homes, sparking a flurry of excavations in the area that has continued till this day, making Madaba 'mosaic central' in the country.

The most famous of the mosaics found is called the Map of Madaba inside what is now the St. George's Church, a Greek Orthodox basilica built over the mosaic. It was unearthed in 1896, and caused quite a sensation in the Christian communities of Europe at the time. Covering the floor of a former Byzantine church dating back to 560 AD, the mosaic is a large map of the Holy Land, depicting the major biblical sites of the Middle East, from Egypt to Palestine, constructed using more than two million pieces of stone, and containing over a hundred captions in Greek. Only a small portion of the map still exists today (it was originally 15-25 meters long by 6 meters wide), but what remains on the floor of St. George's Church is more than enough for one to sense how remarkable the original must have been. Before entering the church, Hazim took us to a visitors' room inside the ticket office to show us a full-size replica of the Map of Madaba and explain it in greater detail. While some portions of the map might not be geographically accurate, considering the limited technologies of the day, it nonetheless serves as a religious index map of the region. Quite extraordinary.

The St. George's Church is not very large, and relatively modest by Orthodox standards, with a simple wooden altar and the typical Christian icons decorating its nave. The main purpose of this church, it seemed to me, was to preserve and showcase the remains of the Map of Madaba, which lies on the floor just a few meters from the altar in a section that is cordoned off to prevent walking on it. Perhaps the most detailed part of this 1500-year old mosaic map depicts the city of Jerusalem, its city walls, gates and main street clearly outlined. Mt. Sinai is recognizable, as is the Dead Sea, and parts of the Nile Delta; you can even see fish swimming in the Jordan River. The spot where Jesus was supposedly baptized is also marked. Again, most of the map is missing, so you need to use a little imagination to 'connect the dots'.

After our visit to the St. George's Church we walked back to the Haret Jdoudna Restaurant for an included lunch, sitting at a long table inside the building's central courtyard. It was a delightful meal consisting of roasted chicken with oregano, fries, pita bread, hummus, spinach salad, baba ghanoush and topped with a dessert made from semolina. An hour later we left Madaba and continued our journey south. I must stop a moment here and extol some of the tourism benefits of this particular region. The town has a lot to offer besides the St. George's Church, there are numerous historic churches, archaeological parks and museums here, all of them featuring artifacts or amazing mosaics excavated over the past century. In addition to Mt. Nebo, just west of Madaba is the Wadi Jadid, a cultivated valley of terraced fields famous for its collection of *dolmens*, early Bronze Age burial chambers and stone memorials. For those of you planning on going to Jordan and are interested in its early history, I would recommend spending a little more time in Madaba.

We left the town heading east along a secondary road towards Route 15, also known as the Desert Highway, where we turned south and drove for more than an hour across mostly arid plains until we reached Road 50, turning west and following that all the way back to the King's Highway to the former crusader town of Karak. Hazim told us the distance between Madaba and Karak along the more scenic King's Highway would have been considerably shorter than heading east (the way we did) and taking the Desert Highway, but we would have traversed numerous small towns and villages along the way where the traffic is often very slow, making the detour *faster*. The Desert Highway is the major artery bordering the desert regions of the country, connecting the port city of Aqaba in the south with

the rest of Jordan and stretching all the way north into Syria. In terms of traffic, it is probably the fastest road in the country. But it is not very scenic. The Desert Highway looks as appealing as the name implies, miles and miles of lifeless desert landscape with an occasional small village or a service station catering to the tractor-trailers and buses plying the isolated two-lane roadway.

We arrived in the historic town of Karak after 2:00pm (I must confess, I lost track of time on this day). Hazim hails from this region and we could tell he took pride in reflecting on its history. The town lies near what was once a section of the ancient caravan trade route between Egypt and Syria. In the bible, it is mentioned as the capital of the Kingdom of Moab, and later became a prosperous Greco-Roman provincial town. It grew in prominence following the First Crusade, when King Fulk V – the third ruler of the Kingdom of Jerusalem – ordered his lord at Montreal (what is now the town of Shoubak) to build a large castle in Karak in 1142 AD as part of a network of fortresses designed to defend the southern borders of the Transjordan. Initially, it was to have been just one of many castles along a chain of them, situated between the Crusader town of Shoubak further south and Jerusalem. But its strategic position atop a hill overlooking the caravan trade route soon established Karak as an important vassal in the Kingdom of Jerusalem, levying taxes on all goods passing through the area, enabling the kingdom to prosper and making Karak the most formidable Crusader stronghold in the Transjordan.

We did not stop in the actual town of Karak, driving instead straight to the castle. Karak is roughly 140 kilometers south of Amman, situated on a triangular plateau surrounded by three valleys. The castle was built on a hilltop at the southern end of this plateau; the town itself grew along the hillside just below it. Today, Karak has one of the largest Christian populations in the country, nearly a fourth of its inhabitants are Orthodox Christians. As we drove up to the fortress the old (and crumbling) defensive city walls were plainly visible, interspersed now with the modern town. We parked on the street just in front of the Ottoman's Gate, the main entrance into the castle, and walked past an ancient-looking piece of artillery guarding the bridge that leads into the stone fortress. We got our first phenomenal glimpse of the valley below from the bridge. I can understand why this location was chosen to build the castle; from this windy vantage point nothing could pass below without its occupant's knowing about it.

The fortress was constructed as a typical medieval *spur castle*, built on the edge of a mountain ridge (the spur) and having three of its sides defended by steep hillsides. Only the gated entrance had to be vigorously protected against a full frontal attack. Basically, this kind of castle building relied heavily on the natural environment for its defenses. Ironically, though, this also proved to be its most vulnerable feature, because the hill adjacent to the spur could be used as a launching point for projectiles. When Saladin attacked the fortress, he did so from the nearby hill, catapulting large stones (and whatever else they had) at the castle. But even this did not dislodge the crusaders. Saladin laid siege to Karak Castle three times before conquering it. How did he finally accomplish this? In less dramatic fashion than one would think. *He starved them out*. In an era without explosives, the only way to defeat a seemingly indestructible fortress was to surround the structure and wait until its defenders ran out of food. On his third attempt to take the castle, Saladin laid siege for over a year and waited until the crusaders were starving to death before negotiating a term of surrender.

We spent close to an hour at the site, making our way through its empty corridors and chambers. At its height, the castle could hold a military force of 2,000 men, protecting a town of approximately 10,000 people within its city walls. On the west side of the spur was a very deep moat separating the part of the ridge that connected to the hill. The original entrance into the fortress is actually closed for renovations, it is called the Crusader's Gate, protected by a very narrow, winding passageway and separated by a thick wall next to the Gallery, which functioned as the castle's stable. In the Gallery is a small staircase that leads to the ruined northeast tower, while a long, stone brick corridor leads southwest to the soldiers' barracks. As we made our way down this corridor, Hazim pointed out the small openings in the ceiling that allowed for communications between the castles different levels. The north wall of the Gallery has a carved headless figure dating back to the Nabataeans of the 2nd century.

The darkened barracks were pockmarked with small holes to emit sunlight; we saw some Byzantine inscriptions on the walls. Across the corridor was a fairly large kitchen area containing a giant oven and large round stones used for grinding olives, one area had a storage section for oil and grains. We found a dead cat in one of the cavernous rooms, a rather creepy moment. The castle also had a church; its sacristy had narrow slits for shooting arrows (suggesting it might have been part of the outer wall at one time). Adjacent to the church is a tower believed to have been used as a

mosque centuries later when the Mamluks controlled the Transjordan. The Mamluks also built the castle's keep; the refuge of last resort within the fortress, constructed with walls more than six meters thick, with archer slits on all four levels and a crenellated tower. The Mamluk Keep was the most heavily defended part of the fortress, designed as the fallback place in case the castle was ever breached.

The upper court of the castle had a cistern for water collection. This was also the area containing the fortress' domestic residences, most of them still unexcavated. Just above the Gallery is the north terrace, with a spectacular view of the valley below. Beyond the castle's parapet are artificially engineered slopes called *glacis*, which made it impossible for invaders to climb over the walls without falling to their deaths. On the southern end of the fortress is the adjacent hill named Umm al-Thallaja, it was from this hilltop that Saladin attacked the castle, catapulting whatever he could at the crusaders. To the west one can see the village of Al-Shabiya from here. This village was originally called Al-Ifranj (in reference to the Franks) because many of the defeated crusaders settled there following the fall of the castle.

Saladin eventually took control of the fortress in 1183. Later, when the Mamluks established their rule in the region (late 1200's), they strengthened the castle's defenses, adding additional towers, deepening the moat and building a lower court. But after a powerful earthquake struck in 1293, Karak Castle sustained heavy damage and – like so many sites before it – was gradually abandoned until it was all but forgotten. In the 1880's, fierce religious fighting broke out between the Muslims and Christians in Karak (forcing the Christians to flee to Madaba and Ma'in). The Ottoman ruler ordered Turkish troops into Karak to unarm the population and restore order; the garrison briefly used the castle while they were stationed there. Today, this historical structure is slowly being excavated, renovated and heavily promoted as a top tourism site. I highly recommend visiting this fortress; it is one of the largest Crusader castles in the Middle East.

Our visit in Karak completed, we once again returned to the Desert Highway and continued southward to Petra. As we boarded the bus to leave, we were greeted by several of Hazim's relatives. The next couple of hours went by slowly, the desert terrain offering up nondescript little villages and a phosphate mining company near Al Wadi Al Abyad (Jordan is one of the world's largest producers of phosphate rocks). We stopped for a bathroom and snack break at a modern service station in Al Hasa (if there was a town

nearby, I didn't see it). Further south, while not visible from the roadway, we passed the Qa Al Jinz mudflats on our left, a relatively large sheltered area in the desert formed from the muddy deposits of whatever seasonal waters might trickle its way into this otherwise arid environment. I don't recall how many small towns and villages we drove by on the Desert Highway – with names like Sad As-Sultani, Jurf Ad-Darawish, Al-Husayniyah, Al-Hashimiyya – but none of them registered more than a blip on Google. This area seemed to form the outer edges of Jordan's desert frontier. Sadly, one of the things these places had in common was the amount of trash (much it in the form of plastics bags) lining the highway.

Eventually, we turned west on an even more isolated secondary road shortly after passing the 'town' of Al-Husayniyah. The sun was beginning to set and Hazim told Hussam to pull the bus over on the side of the road so we could photograph the event. We waited nearly fifteen minutes, taking pictures as the reddish glow of the sun slowly faded out of the sky (seemingly at the end of this barren landscape). The only other thing we saw out there, beside an occasional vehicle, was a string of power line towers stretching across the emptiness. We continued now in the dark towards the town of Wadi Musa (where we would be spending the next two nights), hooking up with the King's Highway as it wound southward again past the former Crusader town of Shoubak (known back then as *Montreal*), containing the ruins of Shoubak Castle. During this portion of the ride Hazim gave us details about the next day's hike into Petra. He told us to wear comfortable shoes (no sandals) for we would be walking a minimum of two and a half miles each way into the canyon. He also suggested a few sites in Petra we might want to visit once we reached the end of the ancient city's main trail and were given several hours to explore on our own. Hazim mentioned something that really struck a cord with me; make the most of your time in Petra, he advised, because this was the *main* reason why you came to Jordan, to witness this ancient marvel. *I was so excited*!

We arrived in the hillside town of Wadi Musa (the Valley of Moses) shortly after 6:15pm. Worshippers were filling into the streets from the local mosque following the Friday night prayer service. This was a fairly large town for the region, with over 25,000 inhabitants, and – until the outbreak of unrest in Syria – enjoying an economic boom as a result of the Petra tourism business. According to Hazim there were more than sixty hotels and lodges in Wadi Musa, although a few have shut down recently owing to a sharp decline in visitors. The homes and businesses here rise up into the

surrounding valley, but this was not evident to us until the light of morning. Basically, Wadi Musa is divided into three parts. Above the town are a few high-end hotels (like the Marriott Petra where we stayed) that offer an amazing view of the sandstone mountains surrounding Petra. The town center is where you'll find the cheaper hotels and lodges, the bus depot and local shops. The lower part of Wadi Musa contains most of the high-end hotels, restaurants and souvenir shops just minutes from the Petra Visitor Center (the entrance that leads to the actual archaeological site).

Before we ascended the winding Queen Rania Al Abdallah Street to the Marriott, we stopped to visit a small three-domed building situated along the King's Highway at the northern juncture of the town. Called the *'Ain Musa* (the Moses' Spring) this is one of two possible locations (the other is near Mt. Nebo) where Moses supposedly struck a rock with his staff, producing a flow of water for the thirsty Israelites. Inside the building is a large boulder, and just below it a small pool of spring water, which flows out through the valley. A group of local pilgrims were dipping their feet in the water when we arrived, and whether or not any of us believed this to be a 'holy site' we nonetheless got caught up in the moment and took pictures of ourselves in front of the large rock and scooped up some water to rub over our hands and faces for good luck. Next to the *'Ain Musa* was a convenience store. Hazim suggested we purchase snacks to take with us on our hike into Petra.

We continued to the hilltop and reached the Marriott by 7:00pm. The hotel was absolutely lovely, but it wasn't until morning that we realized what a spectacular view we had of the Petra mountains from this vantage point. Hazim checked us in and handed out our room key cards in the lobby, telling us when to meet the following morning for our visit to Petra. It was an exhausting day of sightseeing and traveling, and everyone decided to eat inside the hotel instead of riding a taxi back into town. I met Richard and Greg (Maui was too tired to join us) in one of the restaurants and we each ordered an individual-sized margherita pizza. We spent the next hour and a half talking about Florida, its real estate market and whatever else came to mind. At one point, Maui came down to check up on the 'boys' and took our picture before leaving again.

By 9:00pm I was in my room setting aside the clothes for tomorrow's outing. I wasn't sure what the weather was going to be like (it was a bit chilly at night, and the temperatures seemed cooler in the canyons then what I'd experienced thus far on this trip). Hazim told us it would get much

warmer once the day wore on. I opted to bring my nylon fisherman's vest in case it was windy; it had conveniently placed zippered pockets, handy for storing my water bottle, snacks and camera. Before going to bed I also tried writing in my journal, but I was too exhausted to think straight. By 10:00pm I was fast asleep.

Day Six

I awoke at 4:00am, excited over the prospect of finally getting to see Petra, one of my most desired 'bucket list' destinations. I showered and shaved, and spent an hour writing in my journal before heading to the breakfast buffet at 6:00am. Once again, I sat next to fellow 'early birds' Sig and Susan. Following breakfast, I went outside to the terraced pool area and took in the phenomenal view of the mountains surrounding Petra. It was as if we had our own mini-Grand Canyon out back. Atop one of the mountains in the distance – situated on the other side of the wide valley – stood the tomb of Aaron, the brother of Moses, its white structure visible from our hotel.

By 8:00am we boarded the bus and drove down the valley into the heart of Wadi Musa, getting a panoramic view of this hillside town for the first time in the morning light. A short while later we arrived at the Petra Visitor Center, an expanded plaza containing the ticket office, a museum and a small shopping center with cafes and restaurants. In a good year, more than half a million tourists visit this site. Petra is open every day of the year and is only closed on the rare occasion of heavy rains (a safety precaution since lethal flash floods can occur quickly within the canyon passageways during the winter months, so plan your trip accordingly).

There are several things people should be aware of when they visit Petra. This can be a tough hike for individuals not accustomed to strenuous walking. One website quoted the distance between the Visitor Center and the hilltop *Al-Deir Temple* (the furthest point within the site) as 10 kilometers, or just over 6.2 miles. I actually made the climb to the *Al-Deir Temple* (a grueling trek I will discuss shortly) and was hobbling painfully by the time I

returned in the late afternoon. Hazim told us the previous day he would lead us from the Visitor Center plaza to the end of the Roman colonnaded street (where we would eventually split up to explore on our own), a distance of approximately 2.5 miles. He instructed us to allow two hours – *each way* – to make the walk. The problem wasn't so much the distance but rather the terrain. The natural trail is uneven, and while heading into the canyon is at a slight downward angle, you have an *incline* on the way back. Most importantly, almost every temple or point of interest in Petra is perched on some kind of hilltop or rocky ledge (the entire city is carved out of the surrounding canyon), which means you have to do quite a bit of climbing throughout the day if you want to get 'up close and personal' with the archaeological ruins; the steps tend to be steep with no guard rails or safety features whatsoever. It can be quite exhausting. Especially for a 250-pound mailman like me, who suffers from plantar fasciitis. So, a word to the wise: if you're going to Petra, lose a few pounds and bring *very* comfortable hiking shoes!

From the Visitor Center's gate we began our trek along an 800-meter path known as *Bab as-Siq* (which means 'gateway to the Siq'). The *Siq* is a 1.2-kilometer corridor that cuts through the canyon into Petra, which marks the 'official' entrance to the site. At the start of the *Bab as-Siq* – on the left hand side – are a series of stables where the walk-leery traveler can hire a horse-drawn carriage (or ride horseback) into the ancient city. I believe the entrance fee covers the price of the ride from the main gate to the Siq, but the animal guides will demand a nice tip for their services so basically you're still paying for it. Inside Petra you will also find camels and donkeys for hire, even on the steep and dangerous mountainous trails. Going in I would not recommend any other means but walking because there are so many interesting things to see and admire along the way, which you would obviously miss galloping by on a horse. On the way out, though, it might make sense to 'hitch a ride'. Unless you're an avid hiker, your feet will surely be aching after hours of walking and climbing in Petra.

Before I continue, let me give you a brief historical account of this ancient city:

Even before the Nabataeans began settling in the area around 500 BC there have been ancient communities living within these valleys. Evidence of Neolithic villages dating as far back as 9,000 to 11,000 years ago has been found in the surrounding wadis and hillsides. Just to the north of Petra,

at a place called Al-Beidha (Little Petra), archaeologists in the 1950's discovered the site of one of the earliest known farming settlements in the Middle East, built around the same time as Jericho.

The Nabataeans were nomadic traders from western Arabia who traveled through this region along an ancient caravan trail and decided that the mountain corridors of this valley would make a good place to settle down. They called their city *Raqmu* (the name 'Petra' came later, derived from an Old Greek word meaning rock or stone). Little is known about the early culture of the Nabataeans, but apparently their control over this trading route passage allowed them to prosper greatly and build this incredible city over the next five hundred years, carving beautiful structures right out of the red sandstone hills (Petra is sometimes referred to as the Rose or Pink City due to the color of the rock formation).

One of the many remarkable achievements of the Nabataeans was their ability to control the water supply in the area. Heavy rains in the mountains often create severe flash flooding in the valley below, and the Nabataeans – astute engineers – constructed dams, cisterns and water conduits that trapped this valuable commodity, creating an artificial oasis in an otherwise drought-prone region. This allowed their community to prosper as they sold this water to the traveling caravans, attracting even more business. As the wealth of the city grew, the rulers began to build larger and more elaborate tombs and temples, almost all of it carved right out of the rock, many displaying architectural designs influenced by the Egyptians, Greeks and Romans (ideas brought to Petra via the trading caravans). At its zenith – during the reign of King Aretas IV (9 BC—40 AD) – the city had a population numbering 30,000 and had probably adopted a Hellenistic aspect (as evidenced by the large amphitheater). By this time Petra had its own scribes, churning out copies of the Nabataean Aramaic cursive script, the forerunner of Arabic.

In 106 AD, the Roman governor in Syria took control of Arabia, ending the Nabataeans' control and influence in that region and bringing their dynastic rule to an end as the trade route established by the Romans now shifted to Palmyra (in Syria) and the newly created sea lanes from the Red Sea back to Rome by-passed Petra altogether. Stripped of their wealth and influence, the Nabataeans were quickly absorbed into the Roman Empire. But the city was not abandoned. The Romans decided to modernize the city, creating what some historians refer to as a Las Vegas-style retreat along the

old caravan trail. Expert architects and engineers in their own right – who had no affinity for the kind of rock carving method of structure-building the Nabataeans were fond of – the Romans constructed a stone-paved, colonnaded main street, complete with a large decorative gate, a Nymphaeum and a series of public baths. In 131 AD, Roman Emperor Hadrian graced the city with a visit. Gradually the former capital regained its prestige, becoming a capital once again during the 3rd century under a newly-created Roman province known as the *Palaestrina Tertia*, administering the lands stretching from the Negev to the Sinai and the region southwest of the Transjordan.

During the Byzantine period, the Nabataeans stopped using their own written language and switched to Greek, beginning their conversion to Christianity. Many churches were built at this time. In 363 AD, a devastating earthquake severely damaged the city, crippling its water management system, ushering in Petra's slow descent into obscurity. By 551 AD another powerful earthquake further weakened this historic capital, forcing more and more people to leave. At the time of the Arab Muslim conquest of the region – around 663 AD – Petra was abandoned. For the next 1,100 years the city was all but forgotten save for the nomadic Bedouin who periodically used its caves and tombs for shelter.

And then, in 1812, a Swiss explorer named Jean Louis Burckhardt 're-discovered' the site. Burckhardt had studied Arabic and attended science and medicine courses at Cambridge University before embarking on a career in exploration that was so extraordinary it seems written for the big screen. Before he died of dysentery in 1817, at the age of only 33, this amazing young man had been part of the African Association, an exploratory group of Europeans that was tasked to discover the source of the Niger River, he was one of the first persons to record the Hittite hieroglyphs while excavating in Syria, he 're-discovered' the Muslim castle at Ajloun and stumbled upon the famous Abu Simbel Temples in Egypt. A brazen adventurer, he explored Mecca and Medina disguised as a Muslim holy man under the moniker of Sheikh Ibrahim Ibn Abdallah. *The balls on this guy*! I could fill a journal just on his exploits. When he set out to discover the much-rumored 'lost city' of Petra, Burckhardt knew that a previous explorer had been murdered trying to find the site, so he studied Islam and disguised himself as an Arab from Syria. Along the way he was robbed, abandoned in the desert, forced to sleep on the streets like a beggar. When he finally reached Wadi Musa he pretended to be on a holy mission to sacrifice a goat

at the Tomb of Aaron so that the local Bedouins would lead him through the valley. His guide, though, became suspicious, accusing him of being an infidel who just wanted to pilfer the ruins, so Burckhardt was not able to spend a great deal of time at the site. But he became the first European in modern times to see the ancient Nabataean city, and was able to get word back to the continent about its location.

Once news of Petra became public, more explorers traveled to the region, followed by a never-ending procession of archaeologists and scholars. And while looters may have emptied the burial chambers and temples long ago, new ruins continue to be found in Petra, like the mosaic floor of the Petra Church (1992), the hidden tomb complex beneath the famous Treasury building (2003), and the more recent excavation at the Temple of the Winged Lion. Quite frankly, who knows what other wonderful secrets this ancient city is keeping?

Currently, there are more than 800 documented sites in Petra, including about 500 tombs (the more elaborate of the structures), but luckily, the most important ones are easily accessible. Shortly into our hike along the *Bab as-Siq* we came upon the first archaeological ruins of Petra, the *Djinn Blocks*, three carved stone monuments probably used as funerary markers (the word *Djinn* refers to an Arabic spirit). Just a short walk further down we stopped to see the *Obelisk Tomb*, built during the 1st century BC, a multi-level tomb with four carved obelisks on the top structure and a faded carving of a human being in the center (believed to represent the five people buried inside). The bottom part of the tomb is a *triclinium*, a chamber used for annual feasts to commemorate the dead. What is interesting about this tomb, according to Hazim, is that it shows how open the Nabataeans were to outside cultures. The obelisks were a nod to the Egyptian/Hellenistic influences of the day. As we headed closer to the entrance of the *Siq*, I saw a signpost pointing in the direction of several stepped tombs carved into the top of the nearby hillsides.

We reached the entrance of the *Siq* and were greeted by two local men dressed up as Nabataean warriors (nice touch, and a great photo op). While many might confuse the *Siq* for a canyon it is actually a natural fault, the result of powerful tectonic forces that split the rocky landscape apart, creating this narrow, vertical corridor. Winding its way through the reddish sandstone rocks – towering more than 200 meters high – the *Siq* widens and

narrows with each turn. This ancient trail has since been paved to allow for the smoother passage of horse carriages, but in sections one can still see remnants of the stone-paved roadway laid down by the Romans.

The Nabataeans used the *Siq* as a spiritual pathway, as well. Probably borrowing on the concept of the Greco-Roman Sacred Way, the snaking corridor was part of a spiritual pilgrim procession that ended within the city. Throughout the *Siq* are carved niches that once held statues of the main Nabataean god, Dushara. The faithful would touch these images on their way to the large temples. We came upon a dam originally built by the Nabataeans (and currently reinforced by the government) still utilized to control flash flooding today. Along the walls of the *Siq* are carved channels that once transported water from the Wadi Musa springs into the ancient city. According to Hazim, these channels can still be used. In one length of corridor the pathway widens to reveal a tomb next to a lone fig tree. Beyond this point you come across a worn image of a trader and his caravan camel carved into the rock on the left-hand side. Apparently, the Nabataeans were great self-promoters. Everything within the *Siq* – from the spiritual elements to the caravan images – was designed to create a 'buzz', an anticipation of the city to come. And what a beautiful and serene walk! Due to the oxidation of the iron and hematite composition within the rocks, the colors streak and collide in vibrant red and blackened hues. And as you near the entrance of the city itself, the walls of the corridor begin to close in, almost tapering at the top, shutting out light and sound. All of your senses now are focused straight ahead.

The first glimpse of the magnificent *Al-Khazneh* (the legendary structure known by its more popular name, the *Treasury*) is actually a pink sliver seen through the narrow opening of the *Siq* walls. The only way to describe the feeling is to tell you a story from my childhood. Each year in August my dad would drive the family to Miami Beach from New Jersey where we spent our summer vacation. There is a tourist attraction called South of the Border on I-95 (situated near the border of North and South Carolina). The resort and town was built along a Mexican theme with a large statue of a poncho-draped peasant named Pedro over the main street. Back then it was nothing more than a super-hyped tourist trap lined with souvenir shops. The owners turned this unassuming strip of roadway into a sort of traveling Mecca using a coy promotional concept: every so many miles they put up billboard signs advertising South of the Border. Each one was funnier than the last. The billboard signs would start the moment you entered North Carolina and

wouldn't let up until you reached the town. Pedro, the Mexican, would tell drivers they were only 150 miles away from South of the Border, then 120 miles, then 100 miles, and the closer you got the more frequent and elaborate the billboard signs. My brother and I would sit in the backseat of the car giddy with anticipation. We didn't care what they had at South of the Border; *we just wanted to see it*! Well, this is akin to the effect the *Siq* has on visitors to Petra. After walking through this winding corridor – seeing the spiritual niches, hearing the stories from our guide, witnessing the carvings on the natural walls, and all of it beautifully showcased by the swirling colors of the narrowing rocky landscape – one just wanted to arrive, to experience whatever the heck lies beyond all this. And, let me tell you, it doesn't disappoint.

Immediately entering Petra from the *Siq* we were confronted by the tall, pink structure of the *Treasury*, perhaps the most iconic ruin in all of Jordan. Built most likely as a tomb under King Aretas IV during the 1st century BC (and possibly used as a temple later on), this was the structure seen in the Indiana Jones movie that sparked so much interest in Petra. With a façade standing 43 meters tall and 30 meters wide, carved out of the iron-laden sandstone wall directly facing the *Siq*, it dwarfs all who enter the ancient city and makes an indelible first impression. I stood in awe before it, looking up at this marvelous sculpture. For that was what it was: *a giant, beautiful sculpture*. Set back into the pink-colored rock to protect it from the damaging elements, it was carved using Hellenistic influences, and even after more than two thousand years the weathered façade still reveals some incredible details. Its two levels of columns contain mythical figures associated with the afterlife. Perched above the top pediments are four eagles believed to whisk the soul away, below them on the upper level are dancing Amazon warriors with double axes, and on the main level on either side of the large entrance are statues of the mythical twin brothers Castor and Pollux, the 'patron saints' of travelers and sailors, who lived in both the underworld and on Mt. Olympus, home of the Greek gods.

Hazim had us gather in front of the *Treasury* building to explain the history of the structure. There are several legends surrounding the tomb's name. Some believe it goes back to the time of Moses when the Egyptian pharaoh used it as a treasury depository. But the more popular Arabic legend – passed on by the local Bedouins – contends that the name derives from bandits who hid their loot inside one of the stone urns on the second level. Even though it is made of solid rock, the urn has been riddled with bullet

holes over the years in a vain attempt to release its riches. As our guide extolled the wonders of the *Treasury* building, a horse tethered to an empty carriage nearby took a massive dump into its, um, shit bag. When the smell wafted in our general direction, Hazim hastily concluded the lecture and gave us time to explore and take pictures of the structure.

The entrance into the tomb is open, but the area is off-limits. Actually, there is nothing to see except a large cavernous chamber, whatever was inside has long been stolen or removed. Steps in the front of the façade lead to the underground tomb chambers discovered in 2003. We took turns posing in every conceivable manner in front of the *Treasury* (including the famous selfies that usually end up on Facebook) and photographed every inch of its façade. Towards one end of the canyon, to the left as you enter from the *Siq*, is a series of carved steps leading to an area above the tomb which allows for a different vantage point.

The *Treasury* marks the beginning of Petra, and after spending more than twenty minutes there we followed Hazim into the heart of the ancient city, along a widening canyon trail known as the *Outer Siq*. Surrounding us at different intervals were tombs of varying levels, angles and sizes, all of them cut right into the reddish sandstone rock. We stopped in front of a series of flat, very tall interconnected tombs, one of which had a corner angle (one of the few two-sided structures we saw), and witnessed an elderly Bedouin sitting on the ground alongside his grandson playing a rebab, a traditional fiddle-like string instrument made from wood and camel leather. Just beyond here we entered a section called the *Street of Facades*, a rocky corridor lined with more than 40 tombs and structures built in a step formation reminiscent of Assyrian architecture. Someone in the group asked Hazim where did the people of Petra live? Looking at the ancient city's vast tomb structures, and the absence of normal dwellings or palaces, one could easily assume this was a necropolis, a large glorious cemetery. In fact, for a long time this is what most visitors to Petra believed. The Bedouins are traditional nomads, pitching tents wherever they go. Archaeologists now think most Nabataeans lived in tents within the canyons of Petra. What we were seeing were the remains of the tombs (and occasional temples) of the upper classes of their society. The wealth and stature of the deceased dictated the size and grandeur of the tomb.

And why carve instead of build? I think that has more to do with utility than anything else. The mostly desert environment probably didn't yield the

kind of building materials necessary for creating such elaborate structures; besides, the earthquake activity in the region made carving their tombs more practical. What few stand-alone buildings were constructed in Petra have since been tumbled or severely damaged by strong tremors and quakes, but not the tombs, which still exist two thousand years later. The dead were buried in small cavities dug into the walls of the chambers called *loculi*, and most tombs had a banquet hall for funeral and commemorative feasts. The façade was usually decorated with the likeness of the deceased and spiritual images. The larger tombs were constructed from the top down, with some kind of scaffolding devise put in place (a testament to the ability of the Nabataean sculptors; it wasn't as if you could tear down a canyon wall and start all over again if you made a mistake). The completed façade was later plastered and painted, although very few of these exterior decorations have survived the elements and time. Some of the chambers had frescoes, and others – like the royal tombs I saw later in the day – had ceilings streaked with beautiful red and white patterns from the mineral composition of the rock.

Atop the small mountain behind the *Street of Facades* is the *High Place of Sacrifice*, a well-preserved sacrificial altar with carved obelisks more than six-meters high and a large rectangular triclinium for banquets. Used for funeral ceremonies and sacrificing animals to the Nabataean gods this once sacred platform offers a phenomenal view of Petra from above. I don't think anyone in our group made the climb, though, an arduous 45-minute trek up a series of well maintained (but unforgiving) carved steps. Not far from this stairway along the Outer Siq is Petra's *Theater*, an impressive, if weathered, structure. The Nabataeans cut the original amphitheater into the side of the canyon walls during the 1st century BC; it contained 45 rows and accommodated 3,000 spectators. After the Romans arrived in 106 AD, the *Theater's* upper tier was expanded (some tombs were demolished in the process) to hold a capacity crowd of 8,500. A columned, three-storey stage was also constructed, decorated with frescoed niches, but has since been toppled by earthquakes. We continued hiking westward beyond the *Theater*, the Outer Siq broadening into a very wide thoroughfare at the foot of a looming mountain known as Jebel al-Khubtha. Carved into its west-facing wall, hundreds of feet above the Outer Siq, are some of the best structures within Petra, a series of tombs known collectively as the *Royal Tombs*. I visited them on my own later that afternoon.

Hazim gave us a much-needed thirty-minute break here. There was a public restroom area and several shops and cafes in which to sit and rest your aching feet. I used the bathroom and purchased a cappuccino in the nearby café, sitting with Tom, Richard, Greg and Maui on a roofed patio overlooking the Outer Siq. I'm not sure how the conversation started, but I began talking with Greg about medical and physical issues. I guess the older we get the more we like to complain and share notes! Greg mentioned he was a heart-transplant recipient. *I was shocked*. And not in a bad way, either. Greg must have been in his mid-to-late sixties, but he looked awesome, a lot younger than me (and I'm 55…um, as of this writing). A retired airline pilot, Greg was an avid runner and had taken good care of his health prior to being diagnosed with a heart condition. At the time he was in his late fifties and an excellent candidate for the operation. His ordeal was extraordinary – there were moments of touch and go – but his operation (and new heart) was a success and he told me he developed a new passion for life as a result, not taking anything for granted. He credits his beautiful wife Maui for helping him get through the experience. Greg is very lucky, indeed; Maui (her real name is Mary) is a wonderful woman. A former public administrator, she is an artist by trade and quite passionate in her own right. Seasoned travelers, they made such a nice couple together. I was fortunate to have met them, for they truly inspired me.

After the break we resumed our trek towards the back portion of the ancient city, what is commonly referred to as Petra's city center. We stopped at the ruins of the *Nymphaeum* (a large public fountain built by the Romans during the 2nd century AD) just downhill from the *Theater*, where Hazim gave us a brief explanation of Petra's excellent water management system. Besides the channels and cisterns, the Nabataeans constructed roughly 200 dams in the area to trap and divert water to their capital. The Romans built upon this system, utilizing the channels carved into the walls of the *Siq* to transport water from the Wadi Musa spring to the *Nymphaeum*. Earthquake activity has since rendered the fountain into an almost unrecognizable pile of stones, a lone fig tree standing next to it (purported to be 450 years old) marking its location. A group of Bedouin women were selling souvenirs from a table set up beneath the bare thin branches of the tree.

Further west of the *Nymphaeum* is the beginning of the *Colonnaded Street* built by the Romans shortly after they arrived in Petra. This road, which went from east to west, was called the *decumanus* (Petra did not have a north-south axis road, or a *cardo maximus*). Lining this street were

columns of marble-clad sandstone (now gone) separated by covered porticoes that would have led to vendor stalls or shops, making this a busy commercial area. The paved street is in remarkable shape, the marble stones fitted nicely all the way down to the *Temenos Gateway*, an elaborate arched gate leading into the sacred courtyard (or *temenos*) of the *Qasr al-Bint,* a massive temple located at the very far end of the city.

We walked the length of the *Colonnaded Street* and stopped just before the *Temenos Gateway* to view a site called the *Great Temple* on the left-hand side of the road. Still being excavated today by a team from Brown University, this 1st century BC Nabataean temple was one of the first stand-alone structures within the city, and was severely damaged upon its completion by an earthquake. The temple was later used as a small theater (*theatron*). It must have been a real sight when first constructed. At 18-meters high and 40-meters wide, the structure had a staircase leading up to a decorated gateway, with a lower courtyard flanked by a triple colonnade. The sacred enclosure on the upper level was framed by four large columns erected from stone disks and clad in marble. Ongoing excavation work alongside the *Great Temple* reveals a lower structure.

On the other side of the *Colonnaded Street* from here, atop a small hill, are several more sites also in various stages of excavation: the recently uncovered *Temple of the Winged Lions* (27AD), and further up the hillside is the Byzantine-era *Petra Church* (530 AD). Although not noticeable under its current condition, the *Temple of the Winged Lions* was an important temple, so named because of the lion carvings that once topped its columns. The site was most likely dedicated to Atargatis, the female partner of the main Nabataean god, Dushara. So far, excavated fragments suggest the temple was beautifully decorated and had an enormous entranceway with numerous arches and porticoes.

We continued through the *Temenos Gateway*, which officially divided the commercial area of the city from the sacred courtyard of the *Qasr al-Bint,* one of the most important Nabataean structures in Petra. This was another one of the few freestanding buildings constructed within the city by the Nabataeans themselves. Dating back to around 30 BC, its remaining walls outline a temple structure that was once 23-meters high, and featured huge columns, marble staircases, and a raised platform for worship with ornately carved stone reliefs and decorated plaster. The ‘holy of holies’ chamber would have contained large images of the Nabataean god, Dushara. The

once marbled sacrificial altar in front of the temple is unusually leveled with the street, indicating this was where the common folk worshipped and suggesting that the whole area around the temple was considered sacred ground. Archaeologists believe the *Qasr al-Bint* (the name means Castle of the Pharaoh's Daughter, an erroneous title conjured up by the local Bedouin) was most likely the main place of worship for the Nabataeans, who probably referred to it as the Temple of Dushares, and as such held a very important place within the city. The building was eventually administered by the Romans, who incorporated Nabataean mythology to create a cult following for the purpose of justifying the rule of the Roman emperors (who often aligned themselves as descendents of the indigenous gods to appease the locals). It was later damaged by arson and then finished off by an earthquake during the 3rd century AD.

The ancient city of Petra ends shortly beyond the *Qasr al-Bint*, at the foot of the Jebel Habis (mountain). But there are still quite a few things to see here. Near the *Temenos Gateway* are the ruins of the *Roman Byzantine Bathhouses*, and along the hillsides of the Jebel Habis are a few interesting sites like the curious *Columbarium*, a carved out chamber honey-combed with small niches designed, some archaeologists think, to either hold funerary urns or used at one point as a possible dovecote for carrier pigeons. The Jebel Habis also contains the *Unfinished Tomb*, a large structure that was abandoned for some unknown reason; this tomb is significant because it was initially worked from top-to-bottom before being abandoned, leading to the idea that this was how *all* the tombs in Petra were carved. A summit on the Jebel Habis mountain has the ruins of a Crusader fort built in 1116 AD, which, from what I've read, is a bit of a disappointment save for the amazing view of Petra's valley.

At the end of the city are two small museums, the Al-Habis Museum, located on the way up the mountain, and the Nabataean Museum (officially called the Petra Archaeological Museum) next to the Basin Restaurant, not far from the trail leading to the famous *Al-Deir Temple*. I cannot tell you what is on display inside the museums because I spent the rest of my time in Petra exploring the larger tombs, but my research indicated some statues, figurines, painted stuccowork, mosaics and other artifacts that provide a human perspective on the people who once lived in this great city. Hazim ended our walking tour just beyond the *Qasr al-Bint*. It was 11:30am. We now had the rest of the day to explore on our own. Hazim told us there would be two bus pick-ups later that afternoon, one at 3:30pm, the other at

5:00pm. He reminded us to allow at least two hours to walk back to the Visitor's Center, and suggested several sites that we should definitely see, like the *Petra Church* and the *Royal Tombs*.

Perched high up in the hills and hidden from view is one of Petra's legendary sites, the *Al-Deir* (also known as the Monastery), the second most famous temple after the *Treasury*. Getting there constitutes a 'rite of passage', and probably explains its popularity. Visitors to *Al-Deir* have to climb an uneven trail through a steep mountainous crevice, with more than 800 intermittent steps carved into the rocky pathway for good measure. A grueling 45-minute hike (each way). When Hazim asked if anyone was interested in doing the climb, nobody volunteered, *including me*. I had no intention of going up there, my plantar fisciitis was killing me and the idea of spending the next hour and a half going up and down a steep valley trail, and then trekking another two hours back to the bus (in addition to whatever other sightseeing I planned on doing in Petra) seemed overly daunting and ambitious, even for an active mailman! But as the group began to split up, and everyone started off in different directions, Richard came up to me and said he wanted to see the *Al-Deir Temple*. Let me stop here a moment and say this: Richard is a really nice guy, fun loving and adventuresome as they come, I admired him greatly… but he was also in his early seventies, wearing open sandals and had thrown out his back at the beginning of the tour! The man was hobbling about like a three-legged dog. In fact, I thought he was joking. When he suggested we go up there together, I had to refrain from saying, *"You're f---king kidding me, right?"* I have to give the man credit, though, he was serious as a heart attack, at least about giving it a try. Darned if he didn't make me feel ashamed of myself. Here was this man, in his seventies, with a bad back, willing to give it a whirl. And then another thought popped into my mind. I remembered what Hazim told us the day before: make the most of your day in Petra, because this is the reason you came to Jordan. I decided – on the spur of the moment – to do the climb. I felt like a hero already. Of course, I was still on level ground; later I would be whimpering like a coward.

"Okay, let's do it, Richard," I said enthusiastically. I turned to Hazim and asked him which way was the trail to the *Al-Deir*? Our guide took one look at the two of us and if he had any reservations about our abilities to make the climb he disguised it behind a poker face that would have made professional gambler Doyle Brunson proud. He led us to a path behind the Nabataean Museum. After a short while he told us to continue until we reached the first

series of steps. “Good luck” were his parting words (and I could tell he meant it, too). It took us nearly fifteen minutes to reach the bottom of the trail because Richard kept stopping and grabbing his back and wincing in pain. At one point he was doing stretching exercises against the mountain wall to loosen up his back muscles. I took it all in with a healthy dose of skepticism. As he wobbled along the trail, moaning and cursing, my ‘skepticism’ morphed into a ‘very bad feeling’ about taking this man up that mountain. But no sooner than we reached the bottom of the natural stairway, Richard stopped, took one sobering glance up the canyon and shook his head vehemently. *“I can’t,*” he said, *“you’ll have to do it by yourself,”* he then turned around and started back, leaving me on my own. To paraphrase Homer Simpson: **D’oh**!

The path up to the *Al-Deir* begins with a series of carved steps, which end abruptly and continue along an uneven natural trail, at times teetering close to the edge of the ravine, with enough rocky obstacles in the way to keep you mindful and alert. At one point I came across an enormous slab of stone leaning up against the canyon wall in front of me and had to go underneath it like a tunnel. Supposedly, there are more than 800 steps going up, but many are broken or worn away and disappear altogether into the natural environment. I detoured briefly at one point early in the climb to see the *Lion Triclinium*, a small tomb with two weathered lion carvings facing each other, set inside a gully.

At various levels I would run into Bedouin women who had set up souvenir stands on whatever flat clearing was available. I was able to purchase a bottle of cold water from one of them. While there was plenty of shade in between the mountain walls at that hour of the day, the upward hike was making me sweat like an Olympic sprinter and I was afraid of becoming dehydrated. The higher up I went, the more laborious my breathing. I ran into pockets of foreign tourists who were momentarily resting on their way back down. From the looks on their faces, the trek in the opposite direction didn’t seem any easier. *Gulp*. I was so preoccupied with not falling it hadn’t even occurred to me yet to stop, turn around and take in the view until I was almost twenty minutes into my hike. And what a phenomenal sight! Framed by both sides of the mountain walls, I looked out into the Wadi Araba, the vast valley encompassing Petra. The higher up the more intense the view, surrounded by the colorful, weirdly angled and tortured rock formation of the mountainous corridor. I was beginning to understand why they built the *Al-Deir* up here; the area imbued a spiritual majesty. (Or, maybe the high

altitude was making me hallucinate, I'm not sure). I was now dog-tired, sweating, and my feet were aching nonstop. I passed a very lively Bedouin vendor who spoke good English. She took one look at me and smiled. "Don't worry, my friend," she exclaimed, "you're almost half way there!" *Halfway*?… SHIT!

I reached a wide clearing next to a deep ravine and stopped again to take some pictures of the valley. Opposite me on the other side of this formidable canyon was the massive face of the Umm al-Biyara mountain. I have to admit, as exhausting as this climb was, the scenery alone more than made up for it. Roughly ten minutes beyond this point I finally reached the summit where the *Al-Deir* was located. This thing was huge. Cut deep into the side of the mountain, it was more than 50-meters tall and 45-meters wide, with a massive entranceway measuring over 8-meters in height. The columned façade resembled the *Treasury*, but without the elaborate images and decorations. In fact, the simplicity of its façade somehow made this temple appear even larger. The top level had two half-pediments flanking an enormous stone urn. Unlike the *Treasury*, the *Al-Deir* façade actually juts out from the rock face, but, from what I could tell, this didn't seem to weather the structure any more than normal. Perhaps that's because the façade is devoid of images whose features could fade over time.

To protect this monument, visitors are no longer permitted to enter. But one can walk up to the entranceway and step on some of the large stones in front of the open doorway and peer inside. There is a single cavernous chamber with two staircases leading up to a niche and nothing else. In front of the *Al-Deir* is an open clearing, which once served as a colonnaded plaza where sizeable crowds probably gathered to worship. The surrounding hillsides have an amphitheater effect, providing excellent natural acoustics for large events. An inscription discovered near the monument claimed that this was the symposium of the former Nabataean King, Obodas I, who reigned during the 1st century BC and was later worshipped as a deity. The temple was referred to as 'the *Monastery*' during the Byzantine period because it was used as a Christian church, as evidenced by the carved crosses on the inside walls.

Just opposite the large clearing in front of the *Al-Deir* is a teahouse with outside tables and benches where one can relax and take in the site. The proprietor is a very funny, middle age Bedouin with an excellent command of the English language. I ordered a Jordanian coffee (a thick brew laden

with cardamom) and sat with this man while he gave me some historical details about the monument. In back of the teahouse is a trail leading up to a viewing point overlooking the Wadi Araba, Israel and the Palestinian Territories. I know this is going to sound crazy, but I was just too exhausted to continue climbing for another fifteen or more minutes to reach the platform and take in the view. My feet were hurting so bad I had serious reservations about how I was going to get back down the mountain. I had seen young boys guiding donkeys up and down the trail, and the proprietor told me he could secure one for me for roughly $30. I was very tempted, and even summoned one of the boys over to negotiate the fee. But then I took a closer look at the donkey and balked. Or, better yet, the donkey (which in these parts tend to be very small in stature) gave me an up and down glance and began braying hysterically, as if to tell his guide: *"Please don't put this fat bastard on top of me!"*

I relieved myself in one of the outhouses behind the teahouse and purchased another bottle of water before making my descent. Whatever notion I had that the downward angle of the path back to the ancient city would somehow be easier on my feet was short-lived. Turns out, the constant stopping to halt my forward momentum was worse than the climb up. Not only did my heels hurt, so did the tendons in my right foot as I twisted it this way and that way on the uneven trail. And to make matters worse, I experienced cramps in *both* legs halfway down the mountain. After a while, I could no longer continue without stretching my hamstring muscles. Again, I was tempted to hire a donkey guide (several passed me on the way down), but I noticed with some alarm that the animals moved quite brusquely along the rocky steps and tended to navigate the path perilously close to the edge of the ravine. I decided, as painful as it was, to go it alone. The last thing I needed was a suicidal donkey!

I managed to hobble my way back to the ancient city by 1:45pm. There was no sign of anyone from my group. It was still early so I decided to make the most of my time here and visit some of the ruins Hazim had recommended. I slowly made my way back through the *Temenos Gateway*, onto the *Colonnaded Street*. Just after passing the *Great Temple* I turned left and took a short detour up a small winding hill to the *Petra Church* excavation site. In my research, I discovered some confusion surrounding the importance of this Byzantine church. Archaeologists believe the original structure was built around 450 AD over previous Nabataean/Roman remains, a simple church with only one apse and an entrance porch, and

some really nice mosaic floor work lining what is now the southern aisle. But by the 6th century, when Petra was supposedly on the decline, the church was remodeled by the Byzantines and turned into something of a cathedral. Which begs the question: if the city was declining, why would such a basilica be built? Two side apses were added, along with a two-story atrium and a baptistery. The nave was paved, a pulpit was built and chancel screens installed. Perhaps the nicest decorations were the added mosaics, some of the finest such work in the region, which covered portions of the walls and both sides of the aisles. A second remodeling is believed to have commenced around the year 600, which may have led to the fire that ultimately destroyed the church. It was later abandoned. Today, a large canvas covers the site where the roof used to be. I spent fifteen minutes inside the actual church, a three-aisled basilica, admiring the beautiful mosaics lining the northern and southern aisles, images of trees, fish and wildlife, of men hunting and half-naked women carrying clay jars (an unusual mix of images for a Christian church, I thought). Much of it finely detailed and remarkably intact.

From here, I decided to hobble over to the *Royal Tombs*, which, from the distance, appeared to be one of the most striking collection of ruins in the entire ancient city. Not far from Petra's *Theater* I climbed a series of steps – rather steep with no guardrail – leading up the side of the Jebel al-Khubtha mountain to the *Royal Tombs*. Although I was thoroughly exhausted by this point, these particular flights of stairs proved to be less daunting then I imagined. Going up I was able to catch my breath on the various clearings (you'll be greeted by smiling Bedouin vendors at each stop) and took in several panoramic views of Petra. The *Royal Tombs* consist of four large tombs cut against the western massif of the Jebel al-Khubtha mountain overlooking the ancient city. They can be seen from far away, and make quite an impression when the golden glow of sunset shines over them. Archaeologists are still in disagreement over whom the tombs were built for, but, judging from their size and grandeur, they most likely were the resting places of the royals.

For me, the first tomb you reach is the most impressive one. The *Urn Tomb* is set high, separated from the other three tombs on its own private ridge, and directly faces Petra's most sacred temple, the *Qasr al-Bint*. The inside chamber is 17-meters deep and has four loculi in its anterior wall

which once held the royal family buried here. Archaeologists are not sure if this is the tomb off King Malichos II (40-70AD) or King Aretas IV (8 BC – 40 AD). The long vertical façade terminates in a pediment topped by a large stone funerary urn, hence the name of the tomb. In the 5th century AD, an apse was carved into the central recesses and the structure was converted into a Christian church. There are several unique features about this tomb. A large portico of Doric columns was carved into the rock on an adjacent side of the façade, as if something else was going to be inserted here. The large open terrace in front of the tomb sits atop two layers of vaults that were later added by the Byzantines. The ceiling within the massive chamber is decorated by the beautiful white and red swirling composition of the rock.

Heading leftward from the *Urn Tomb* I followed the edges of this ridge until I came upon the next three tombs, which were built almost side-by-side on a different slope of the mountain. The first one is actually the smallest of the group, the *Silk Tomb*, noteworthy for being perhaps the most colorful of all the tombs in Petra. The structure was carved into a recess and has a multi-level façade streaked with the natural colors of the sandstone rock. Next lies the *Corinthian Tomb*, the most damaged of the group. Its façade is a hybrid of cultural influences: the top level is Hellenistic, sporting three heavily eroded pediments over a more traditional Nabataean portico on the lower level. The fourth structure is the *Palace Tomb*, one of the widest such structures in all of Petra. This three-story façade was built to imitate a Roman or Hellenistic palace; the second level contains more than a dozen columns. It has several unique features, including a portion of the top level that had to be constructed separately because the rock face did not extend that high. A stage platform was built in front of the *Palace Tomb* and beyond it is a large courtyard overlooking the city below. This feature suggests that perhaps this tomb was used for lavish funeral services accorded to the kings.

Just a few hundred meters around the mountainside from the *Royal Tombs* (although I was not aware of it at the time) is the *Sextius Florentinus Tomb* built around 130 AD for the Roman governor of Arabia who had requested to be buried in Petra. The inscription above the entrance describes the man's exploits, allowing the tomb's occupant to be identified. It is the only structure in the ancient city that archaeologists are absolutely *certain* for whom it was built.

I glanced at my watch. Almost 3:00pm. It was time I started my long trek back to the Visitor Center. I stood on the ridge in front of the *Palace Tomb*

and took one final panoramic visual sweep of Petra below. A destination of a lifetime. I sighed and headed back down to the Outer Siq, the emotional moment somewhat sullied by the worsening pain in my feet. As I passed the *Theater* hunger pangs momentarily replaced my pain as my most pressing problem, not having eaten in more than eight hours, and then I remembered the bag of trail mix I had stashed inside one of my vest pockets. While maneuvering the *Streets of Façade*, munching on my trail mix, a young Bedouin man sitting behind a makeshift table selling polished stone jewelry beckoned me over. He was not interested in selling me anything; he gestured at my bag of trail mix and asked in broken English if he could have some. Who knew how long this poor man had been sitting there trying to sell his trinkets? I smiled and poured a generous portion of trail mix into his cupped hands. Nearby, another young Bedouin saw this and came over and asked for some, too. I obliged, and as I continued on my way the first man ran up to me and gave me a small pendant as a way of gratitude. It was a very touching moment. The pendant has become one of my most cherished souvenirs.

By the time I reached the *Treasury*, several camel guides had been following me atop their gangly animals, imploring me to hire them for the short trip back to the Siq. I actually got cramps in my legs just walking along the trail, and the painful look on my face must have conveyed desperation. I'm certain the camel guides were whispering to each other in Arabic, wondering when I would collapse, probably making side bets as to the precise moment. I took some last-minute photos of the magnificent *Treasury* before re-entering the Siq corridor and heading back to the Visitor Center; along the way I stopped to read some of the inscriptions below the niches (allowing me to rest, as well). The cruelest part of all was when I reached the *Bab as-Siq*, the final 800-meters at an uphill incline. I made it to an outdoor café inside the Visitor Center plaza and took a grateful seat, ordering a Jordanian coffee. It was 4:30pm and still no sight of anyone from my group. Several minutes after my coffee was served, Hazim showed up looking for me. I was the only one who had elected the 5:00pm bus pick-up; everyone else had gone back to the hotel earlier. I quickly finished my coffee and followed Hazim to an awaiting mini-van (our bus was currently being used to help transfer a group of tourists stranded on the side of the road leading into Wadi Musa). In the hotel lobby I ran into Greg and Maui, who were heading to the steam/sauna rooms (and looking very refreshed, I might add). We agreed to meet for dinner in the main dining hall at 6:00pm. I limped

back to my room and rubbed the bottom of my feet against two very cold cans of Coca-cola I found in the mini fridge. Afterwards I took a hot shower.

By 5:30pm I went outside to the pool terrace to witness the sunset over the spectacular valley in back of our hotel. Greg, Maui, Nedra, Mary Anne, Kimberly, John and Hazim were already gathered there (some wanted to photograph the sunset). Unfortunately, cloud cover ruined the event. My fellow tour members asked me about the *Al-Deir* temple and what the climb had been like. I'm certain the weary look on my face spoke volumes. Maui looked stunning in a black Arab dress and matching hijab she'd purchased earlier on the tour and I couldn't resist taking a picture with her. For dinner that night I sat with Greg, Maui, Nedra and Thom, electing to order the buffet (a nice spread of Kafta in sauce, grilled chicken, fish, rice, veggies and plenty of desserts). I believe a few of our tour members had gone into town for a cooking demonstration. Richard never made it for dinner; apparently he was in so much pain he opted to go to bed early. I *knew* the feeling, buddy! After a pleasant meal and great conversation, I bid goodnight to everyone and returned to my room. Sleep came quickly that night.

I dreamt I was at the Al-Deir altar, hacking my feet off at the ankles and offering them to the Nabataean god, Dushara…

Day Seven

Shortly after midnight I was jolted awake by terrible cramps in both legs. I had to limp around my room for nearly twenty minutes before the pain subsided and I was able to get back to sleep. When my alarm clock went off at 4:00am I immediately placed several cans of cold beverages from the mini fridge on my feet to help reduce the swelling, and did some stretching exercises for my legs and plantaris muscles. I want to make one thing clear, 21 years of delivering mail has put a lot of stress on my feet, legs, joints and back. The older I get the more these ailments plague me. I do not want to give the impression that visiting Petra was such a grueling physical endeavor; in other words, my daylong hike through the ancient city

aggravated my previously existing conditions, making my 'normal' aches and pains worse. The average visitor to Petra will not experience these kinds of discomfort. Just bring comfortable shoes, wear a brimmed hat and drink plenty of water. *This site is definitely worth the physical effort to see.*

I took a hot shower and spent more than an hour writing in my journal. Before going to breakfast at 6:30am I placed my luggage outside my room for the porter to pick up. That morning I sat with Richard, Greg and Maui, in a section of the main dining hall with a great view of the surrounding valley. By 7:30am we were back on the bus heading south to visit the Wadi Rum. We spent nearly 45-minutes traveling on the scenic King's Highway, to our right was the Jebel Masuda, a mountainous reserve, and beyond it the expanse of the Wadi Araba, the long desert valley separating Jordan from Israel. By 8:15am we reached the small town of Ras An-Naqab, connecting to the Desert Highway once again, traveling further south through some very desolate terrain. We passed several small villages, including Al-Humayma, which once served as a Nabataean trading post and grew into a modest provincial town under the Romans, later becoming the family seat of the Abbasid dynasty that overthrew the Umayyads. There is an ongoing excavation of a Roman fort near the town. I would venture to guess that much of this seemingly barren area, situated along the ancient caravan trade route, conceals quite a bit of history.

During the drive to the Wadi Rum, Hazim enlightened us on Bedouin tribal customs. Jordan is divided into tribes and tribal zones. While the government owns the land, the tribes are given permission to live on them. The Bedouins can pitch tents within their tribal zones and have their animals graze freely. Each tribe has some form of hierarchy, with clan elders leading the bunch. Hazim outlined the pros and cons of such a societal structure. **The pros**: belonging to a large clan has its advantages; the group always has your back, helping the downtrodden within its ranks and fighting to protect its members from harm or injustice. **The cons**: this sort of communal-based environment does not tolerate 'individuality' very well, so each member is forced to conform to its customs and mindset. Another problem with belonging to a large tribal group, according to Hazim, is that one 'bad act' can reflect on the whole tribe. He illustrated his point by giving us an example in the case where a member of one tribe commits murder (or some other major crime) against the member of another tribe. The entire community is now held accountable, and retributions can occur if the two tribes do not reach some kind of accord. There have been instances when an

entire tribe has to move out of a region to avoid violence. For this reason, Hazim said, modern Jordanians have been electing to form smaller tribes to avoid the pitfalls and problems associated with a much larger group.

Hazim mentioned that in a tribal setting, attendance at funerals and weddings is considered a must, even on short notice. Perhaps one can get out of attending a distant relative's wedding by sending a family dignitary (with a sizeable gift), but skipping a funeral is a major no-no, and tabs are often kept at these events. As for courtship and marriage? Hazim's father had seven wives and – hold onto your ovaries – 73 children! After the bus settled down he explained that as a Bedouin his dad only needed to pitch his tents and have suitable lands for grazing, everything was rent-free, so to speak. In other words, the cost of providing for such a large family back then wasn't astronomical. In fact, having that many kids was like a form of social security, ensuring *someone* would take care of you in your old age. The more the better. In today's world there are definitive costs associated with raising children, so families are considerably smaller.

Marriages were traditionally arranged in Jordan between families, but that, too, has changed with the times. Today, Jordanian women go to school and work, and there are many opportunities for young people to meet and fall in love in the universities or at the workplace. The normal practice is for a male suitor to ask permission from the woman's family to court, which, for all intents and purposes, is understood to mean that a marriage will be forthcoming. There is no such thing as 'casual dating' in Jordan. And even the family structure is different nowadays. Women have more say in family matters because, quite frankly, they now work and are essential providers. To get a divorce in Jordan is easy, the laws are straight forward and hassle free, but very few couples actually divorce due to tribal pressures. They are usually encouraged by elders to work things out (for better or for worse) for the good of the tribe; scandal is to be avoided at all costs.

We traveled along the Desert Highway for about an hour, stopping in one of these small villages to make a pit stop. By 9:15am we reached the town of Ar-Rashidiyya and turned left onto a two-lane road that led straight into the Wadi Rum desert, passing a section of the railroad track initially built by the Ottomans more than a hundred years ago as part of their Hejaz Railway system. During the late 1800s, the idea of building a railway was initially proposed to help alleviate the suffering of Muslim pilgrims through the Hejaz region of western Arabia on their way to Mecca and Medina. But

its underlining purpose was to connect Constantinople (the capital of the Ottoman empire in Turkey) with its outlying territories in the region for both economic and military support. The Hejaz Railway reached as far as Medina before construction stopped due to the outbreak of World War I. Today, two upgraded branches of this railway are still operational. The one we crossed serves as a transport for the phosphate mines and for commerce out of the port of Aqaba. The Turks, with the support of German engineers, constructed it in the early part of the 1900's, using a narrow gauge track, much smaller than what we use in the U.S. When the war of independence broke out in the Transjordan, the rebel forces routinely targeted the tracks to prevent the railway from being used by the Turkish military.

We followed this secondary road straight into the Wadi Rum Visitor Center. After getting off the bus, most of us climbed to a lookout post above the center to get our first glimpse of the amazing terrain beyond. I have seen many deserts in my travels now, from Egypt to Morocco, from Mexico to Peru, but nothing like this. The Wadi Rum is a fragile desert environment stretching from north to south over 100 kilometers with a central valley that cradles the dominant Jebel Rum (mountain). Throughout its numerous canyon corridors are beautiful reddish sandstone hills, each jaggedly different from the next, surrounded by the fine desert sand of the valley, a unique reddish-orange color. When we arrived the winds were picking up, creating a swirling sandy haze that enveloped the hills, giving the illusion of an alien planet. In fact, the recent movie *The Martian*, starring Matt Damon, was filmed here in the Wadi Rum because (apparently) it resembles the surface of Mars. The entire wadi is a protected site, administered by the Aqaba Special Economic Zone Authority, which has the dual task of promoting tourism in the area (to benefit the local Bedouins) and safeguarding the environment.

The Wadi Rum is a unique desert, there are many hidden wells and springs here, which during ancient times gave rise to wine vineyards, olive and pine trees (all of it gone now save for some trees up in the mountains). Throughout the area are burial mounds, and the sandstone cliffs reveal thousands of inscriptions and petroglyphs (carved images on the rock face) of camel caravans and native animal species, suggesting this place was an important hunting ground and meeting place for ancient tribes. The Greeks and Romans mentioned the Wadi Rum in their writings, and some Islamic scholars believe the Ad, an old Arab tribe described in the Quran, once inhabited the region. The Nabataeans settled here around the 4th century BC,

sharing the desert with other tribes from southern Arabia. But what put this place on the map were the extraordinary accounts of Thomas Edward (T.E) Lawrence – more famously referred to as Lawrence of Arabia – in his autobiographical book, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (published in 1922), in which he describes, in marvelous literary detail, the landscape of the Wadi Rum and his own exploits during the Arab Revolt that led to the region's independence from the Ottoman Empire.

An Englishman who studied archaeology at Oxford, Lawrence became enthralled by the Middle East while doing his thesis research on Crusader castles. During World War I he was commissioned as an intelligence officer in Cairo by the British, later playing an important liaison role not only during the Sinai and Palestinian campaigns against the Turks, but also in the Arab Revolt in the Transjordan. The Ottoman Empire had aligned itself with Germany during the First World War and the British, in an attempt to keep them out of the conflict, engaged the Turks on various, extremely bloody and brutal fronts. The campaigns waged in the Middle East (which included over a hundred thousand Arabs) led to the partition of the Ottoman Empire into European Mandates in the region. France governed in Syria and Lebanon while the British controlled the areas formerly known as Mesopotamia (Iraq) and Palestine (modern day Israel and Jordan).

These European Mandates ended by the 1940s, by then, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Israel and Jordan had all become independent states or kingdoms. Lawrence had accompanied the Arab forces in their fight against the Turks, donning Arab clothing and learning to ride a camel like a pro, he worked closely with Abdullah I, the leader of the revolt in the Transjordan who later became the Emir and then eventually the King of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan when independence was declared in 1946. Although some of his exploits were exaggerated by the West to enhance his 'hero status' – and many Arabs had never actually heard of him at the time – Lawrence is nonetheless credited with bringing world recognition to this otherwise strip of forgotten desert (where he and the Arab forces often hid from the Turks and planned their guerrilla attacks). Today, the Jordanians play up the T.E. Lawrence card because its good for the foreign tourism trade, bringing more and more curious westerners to the region. For me, the Wadi Rum was a pleasant surprise, one of many highlights on this tour.

The Wadi Rum is as unforgiving as any such desert environment. In fact, my first glimpse of it – as beautifully alien as it was – made me think that nothing could survive out here. But I was wrong. Despite its barren appearance this region is home to quite an unusual ecosystem. Although we didn't see more than sand and hills during our visit, the areas near the perennial springs offer hanging gardens of watermelon, figs, mint and ferns, the plants providing much-needed shade along the mountains for a collection of fauna. Due to the extreme heat of the day and lack of ground water, most of the mammals that inhabit the Wadi Rum come out at night, like rabbits, hedgehogs, or the curious little hyrax, a rodent-like creature that is somehow related to elephants and manatees. Occasionally, you'll see bigger fauna, like jackals, wolves or the ibex (a large-horned goat) roaming the mountains. This region is also known for its huge predatory birds (falcons, eagle owls, kestrels) that circle above hunting for the desert's many species of reptiles and arachnids. Yep, besides the lizards and iguanas, there are also scorpions and large camel spiders lurking beneath the sand. But don't worry, they tend to be shy and avoid people.

The Visitor Center has a small museum detailing the peoples, history and the geography of the Wadi Rum (including a 10-minute film about the area). From here you can set out on foot over a trail that leads to a nearby Bedouin village or rent 4WD trucks to take you out into the desert. We walked to the rear of the center where more than a dozen old pick-up trucks were parked in the desert. The back of each truck had been lined with bench seats. Hazim secured three trucks for us; we divided ourselves into three groups of six. In my truck were Richard, Greg, Maui, John and Paul. We set out into the Wadi Rum, the wheels of our trucks churning up a mini-sand storm as we tore into the desert. I have no idea how far we went, but the reddish sand and the streaked formation of the sandstone hills made the trip an unusual journey indeed. I had to keep one hand on top of my boonie hat to keep it from blowing away in the wind; it was a bumpy and exhilarating ride. After about fifteen minutes we reached a campsite between a series of hills where a herd of camels was waiting. We got out of the trucks and headed over to one of the nearby cliffs so that Hazim could show us some of the petroglyphs carved into the rocks (images of long-ago camel caravans and stick-like images of people). He gave us a brief lecture on the Bedouins of the Wadi Rum, and then those of us who wanted to experience a camel ride through the desert were led to the awaiting animals. I believe the price was 20 Jordanian dinars (including the tip).

The camels were of the one-hump variety. Their handlers quickly brought the tall animals to their knees so we could mount them. I have ridden camels in both Egypt and Morocco, so I knew enough to prepare myself when they spring up on all fours. The only difference was the saddle horn. In my previous experiences a metal T-Bar shaped saddle horn was used, making it easy to hold onto. But here, in the Wadi Rum, they were made of a single piece of upright wood with a knob-like handle grip. To be honest, it felt as if I was trekking through the desert holding onto a wooden phallic symbol. Our little caravan set out through the sandy canyon, the animals tethered to one another in groups of four led by a Bedouin guide. As we traversed the desert, I learned a little secret about riding camels. You can loop one leg around the saddle horn for a more comfortable and steadier ride. I had no idea what section of the Wadi Rum we were crossing, after a while the eerie reddish landscape begins to look the same. If you lost your bearings, it would be quite easy to wander aimlessly in these canyons. Occasionally, the winds would kick up, creating a swirling cloud of sand that rose high above us.

We rode our camels for about 30 minutes, reaching a Bedouin campsite nestled at the bottom of a deep mountain crevice. We dismounted and went inside one of the two tents. The outside of the tent was black with white stripes; the inside was a long open corridor, divided in sections for sitting and cooking. The floor was covered with very worn rugs. Traditional tents were woven of goats' hair that allowed for the inside to be cooler during the heat of the day, and would contract if wet to keep the rain out. Today, these tents are probably made of a different, more modern-age material. In the center of the tent were several end-to-end tables covered with items for sale, like scarves, headdresses, soaps, spices, teas and other local Bedouin souvenirs. We sat around the edges of the tent on padded benches while Hazim gave us a brief talk about traditional Bedouin customs. Our hosts served us a delicious mint tea.

Most people think the word 'Bedouin' describes desert-dwelling nomads, but in actuality it refers to any group of nomadic-living clan folk, regardless of nationality, who roam the deserts, countryside or cities. In today's modern, technological world, it is becoming more and more difficult for large groups of tribal people to just uproot and wander around from place to place. In Jordan, successful attempts have been made to get the Bedouin to settle down. In the Wadi Rum, for example, the tourism ministry has convinced these nomadic tribesmen (several thousand in number) to live in

villages and make a living off of the tourism trade. The same holds true for the region around Petra.

The Bedouin hospitality of the desert is legendary. You wouldn't want to piss these people off, but if you come in peace, they will treat you like family. A fire is constantly going and tea (sometimes coffee) will always be offered. Traditionally, according to Hazim, guests (including traveling strangers) were invited to stay and eat for several days without questions being asked or any sort of remuneration required. After about three days, though, they will become curious and inquire as to your purpose in their area; your continued stay would depend on your reasons for being there. Hazim went on to explain how the tents were divided between function and sexes. When he was done speaking, one of the local Bedouin gave us a demonstration on how to put on the typical headdress of the desert dweller, known as a *shaal*. Greg, Nedra and Mary Anne volunteered; our host wrapped their heads up in seconds using a variety of scarves from the souvenir table. I took a photo of Greg, who looked like an American sheik! We were given twenty minutes to shop before leaving. The prices were very reasonable. Hazim told us beforehand that selling souvenirs is one of the few ways the Bedouin have of supporting themselves, so I think everyone purchased something. Outside, in a clearing between the two tents, was a large boulder with the carved facial images of T.E. Lawrence on one side and King Abdullah I on the other.

We re-boarded the 4WD trucks (they had followed us to the campsite with the members who didn't want to ride the camels) and we continued deeper into the Wadi Rum to visit another, much larger campsite for lunch. We zipped along a narrow canyon corridor before reaching an area of open desert with shrubs of some kind protruding in patches from the sand. I read that what little rainfall accumulates here annually allows for more than 200 species of flowers and grasses to bloom, including medicinal plants still used by the Bedouins today. The Wadi Rum is simply amazing. We raced across this open orange desert, swirling sand clouds obscuring some of the hills in the distance, and came to stop in a clearing beside a group of sandstone cliffs in front of the campsite. This was a large site, with more than five dozen numbered guest tents lined up like a military encampment. A few of the tents were bigger and fancier, and had the letters VIP on them. Basically, this was a tourist campsite, where foreigners can spend a few nights living in the desert, having a more 'authentic' Bedouin experience. We saw the inside of one VIP tent; it was spacious and had a tiled bathroom in the back! There

were also several very large communal tents towards the rear of the camp used as dining halls and meeting places, adjacent to them were bathroom and showering facilities.

When we arrived, Hazim led us to an outdoor cooking section where two Bedouin men were already waiting for us. They wore the traditional white clothing (the long *galabeya*) and *shaals* of the desert people (each wore a different colored *shaal*, the red signified a Jordanian, while the black headdress belonged to a Palestinian). Our entire meal had been cooked underground. In front of these men, sticking out of the sand, were several large metal cans (the bottoms lined with some kind of charcoal, I think). One of them was buried completely. The Bedouin men cleared the sand from this container using a shovel. They then hoisted a metal basket from inside that was lined with cooked chicken and lamb. We proceeded to one of the main dining tents for lunch. And what a feast they served! Beside the poultry and lamb (very tender and juicy), we had a choice of roasted potatoes and veggies, rice, pita bread, a wonderfully creamy hummus, homemade yogurt, baba ganoush, fresh mixed salad, and for dessert, a cassava pound cake dripping with honey that tasted similar to a coconut macaroon. Delicious. The Bedouin kept encouraging us to eat more.

Our visit to the Wadi Rum ended with lunch. Before re-boarding our bus (which was nearby) for the long road trip to the Dead Sea area, Hazim suggested we use the bathroom facilities since we wouldn't be stopping again for at least two hours. As we left the tent, most of us thanked the Bedouin men for their hospitality. They smiled, genuinely pleased. By 12:30pm, under clouds of swirling reddish sand, we drove back to the Desert Highway and headed north. This was the longest bus ride of the tour, and the plain desert landscape didn't make the time pass any faster. Unlike the fascinating Wadi Rum, with its contrasting sandstone cliffs and colorful sand, the area along the Desert Highway reminded me of the desolate drive along Route 10 in Texas, near the border with Mexico. A monotonous sand and pebble landscape with some occasional shrubbery thrown in. Most of the vehicles using this section of the highway were tractor-trailers hauling cargo and sheep from the port of Aqaba up to Amman. The roadway was badly in need of repairs, with cracks and gaping holes that made the ride quite bumpy in stretches. I saw many blown-out tires along the side of the highway, which made me wonder what would happen if you broke down out here in the middle of nowhere?

The combination of our big lunch, the gently swaying motion of the bumpy highway ride and the plainness of the view all conspired to lull me to sleep. I didn't wake until we reached the rest stop in Al-Hasa (the same cafeteria/souvenir shop/gasoline station we'd used on the way down) in the Tafila Governorate. It was 2:30pm when I checked my road map. I was shocked at how much ground we'd covered while I slept. Hazim handed out individually wrapped date-filled biscuits on the bus, and told us to request a complimentary tea inside the cafeteria. After using the restrooms, many of us sat in the lounge area enjoying our 'tea and biscuit' break. Twenty minutes later we were heading north again.

As we passed the small villages along the Desert Highway I was once again saddened by the roadside trash. I consider myself a quasi-environmentalist. I mean, I'm aware that it is impossible to erase my 'human footprint' completely; everyone produces a considerable amount of waste throughout his or her lifetime. It is as inevitable as death and taxes. On my end, I don't litter, I try to use environmentally friendly products, install devices in my home that conserve energy and water, try to recycle as much as I can and so forth. When I see piles of garbage accumulating along the streets it is always a heart-wrenching thing for me. Why anyone would want to live amongst trash is beyond me, yet I have been to many places where the locals seem immune to its accumulation. Perhaps this is a logistical problem; maybe these poor communities do not have adequate means to dispose of refuse. But allowing it to simply pile up along the streets is both sad and appalling. Many of the small desert towns we passed along the way were littered with plastic trash. I have seen similar situations in other countries (including areas of the U.S.). So let me make a suggestion – um, in case anyone else but me is actually *reading* these journals – why don't the governments of these countries offer money for trash collection? Maybe they can pay so much for every kilogram of plastic bottles or bags or other trash people pick up and bring to a collection point. This way, there would be an economic incentive to go along with the environmental one. I'm certain the world's roadside garbage would disappear overnight if poor people were paid money to clean it up. Just a thought, folks.

The closer we got to Amman the heavier the traffic along the Desert Highway. It took nearly two more hours before we reached our next rest stop in the town of Al-Jizah, adjacent to the Queen Alia International Airport. Shortly after this stop we made a left turn onto a secondary road and hooked up with Route 40, which took us west to the Dead Sea. The scenery changed

dramatically. We had left the desert behind and were traveling along the green fertile hills of the Jordan Rift Valley. Despite the current drought, the hillsides were covered with olive groves and fields of fruit and vegetable crops. As we descended the mountain roadway towards the Dead Sea (the lowest land point on earth) my ears began to pop. We stopped momentarily along the side of the road so Hazim could point out a sign welcoming people to the area. According to the sign, the Dead Sea was 390 meters below sea level. But the actual measurement is now 430 meters below sea level; in the 17 years since this sign was posted, the Dead Sea has shrunk 40 meters due to continued evaporation and overuse, an alarming rate that many ecologists believe will doom this historic body of water to extinction if better conservation methods aren't employed soon. I'll discuss this in more detail on Day Eight.

We continued our descent along Route 40, making one final stop before reaching our hotel at a souvenir shop famous, among other things, for locally made products like cosmetics and therapeutic oils and ointments derived from the salt and mud of the Dead Sea. A sales representative demonstrated the various uses of the products in curing a host of human conditions, from wrinkles to dry scalp. I spent most of my time here browsing their unique line of souvenirs, which included beautifully handcrafted globes and chess sets.

Route 40 ends just before the inoperable Prince Abdullah Bridge. The bridge was constructed over the Jordan River in the 1950's as a crossing point into the West Bank, but was severely damaged by the Israeli Defense Forces during the Six Day War of 1967; it sits unused like some stark memorial to the region's violent past. Just to the north is the King Hussein Bridge, which is now the designated entry point between the West Bank and Jordan. We turned left here onto Highway 65, known as the Dead Sea Highway, and followed it for several kilometers to our hotel in the resort town of Sweimah, to our right was the Dead Sea, its intensely blue waters tempered by the setting sun. On the other side of this magnificent body of water was the State of Israel. We arrived at our hotel, the Jordan Valley Marriott and Spa, just after 6:00pm. The entire town of Sweimah seemed to consist of nothing but swanky hotels and spas built along the waterline. Security was very tight as we entered the main gate.

The Jordan Valley Marriott and Spa was truly an excellent way to end our trip; a large modern resort boasting one of the biggest spa facilities in the

region. *Thank you*, Gate 1 Travel. The back of the hotel had several terraces (with numerous pools) leading down to the rocky shores of the Dead Sea. My room was on the fourth floor and I had to traverse two very long corridors just to reach it; I mean, this place was huge. Some of the suites were multi-level. Gail and Steve, who are members of a Marriott rewards program, were given a spacious luxury suite that resembled a townhouse apartment, including *three* bathrooms and a private massage room; Gail joked that when she was in the room she couldn't find her husband half the time! I waited nearly 30 minutes for the porter to bring up my luggage; in the meantime I washed up, made some coffee and wrote down notes in my journal. I had a small balcony in my room (with table and chairs) overlooking the main pool terrace, and to the left was a nice view of the Dead Sea. I sat out here, sipping my coffee and breathing in the salty night air. *Ahhhh, what a life*!

At 7:30pm I went downstairs to the hotel's signature Italian restaurant, *Il Terrazzo*, to join my group for an early 'farewell' dinner. Even though we still had one full day left in the tour, most of us would be leaving at staggered times beginning late the following evening, which necessitated having our final group meal on this night. We sat around a series of long tables, and over the next hour and a half the staff continuously came around serving courses of salads, pasta, pizza, risotto, grilled chicken with potatoes and finally dessert and coffee. Earlier, I had everyone sign an email list and copies were made at the front desk and distributed. No matter how many of these tours I take, it never ceases to amaze me the camaraderie that develops among the travelers in such a short time span. Many of us will probably never see each other again, so it is somewhat of a paradox: a joyous time coupled with this feeling of impending dissolution. I can truly say that I enjoyed this group, and hope that some of us can travel together again in the future.

When the meal was over, I found Mike and Teri in the pool terrace area and together we descended the section of stairs and pathways leading to the shoreline. It was dark, and there wasn't much of a 'beach' to see, more like a narrow rocky fringe that led into the water. The Dead Sea glistened in the moonlight. Mike and I went to the edge and scooped up some of the salty water; it actually felt oily to the touch. Next to the staircase closest to the shoreline were pots filled with Dead Sea mud that guests could use to smear on themselves. The mud in this area contains high concentration of minerals that have therapeutic properties: iodine (for glandular ailments) calcium and

magnesium (for allergies and bronchial conditions), bitumen (for skin-rejuvenation) and pungent bromine (a stinky natural chemical that induces relaxation). Teri and I each took a small sample; it clumped together and had the consistency of moist clay.

Back in my room I couldn't resist putting a mudpack on my face. The smell was a tad strong. I sat in front of the TV flipping through the channels, trying to find something in English to watch while the mud 'worked its magic'. Most of the Arabic news programs were focused on a car bombing that occurred earlier in Ankara, the capital of Turkey. I tried to follow the news but soon fell asleep. I awoke, still sitting in the chair in front of the television set, about two hours later; the mud had dried and caked on my face. It was not a pretty sight and took quite a bit of scrubbing to remove. Disappointingly, I didn't look any younger. Perhaps this stuff needed more time to work? I slipped into bed, hoping against hope I would morph into Brad Pitt by morning…

Day Eight and Nine

I had set my alarm clock for 5:00am. Not that I needed to get up that early (our optional excursion to Bethany-Beyond-the-Jordan wasn't scheduled until 9:30am), but I wanted to spend some time writing in my journal and to witness the sunrise over the Dead Sea, which was a letdown since the morning was overcast and gray. Before I began writing I slid the balcony door open to let in some fresh air and soon discovered a flock of pigeons had taken up residence in a nearby tree, their incessant cooing made me lose my concentration and I had to re-close the balcony door for peace of mind. I shaved and showered, cleaning Wadi Rum sand out of my ears and nostrils, and headed to the breakfast buffet at 8:15am. The hotel's main dining room was an enormous marbled hall with multiple buffet tables offering a varied (and delicious) breakfast fare.

I joined Richard, Greg and Maui at their table. We discussed our plans for later that afternoon. I'm not sure what Richard was planning to do but

Greg and Maui had signed up for a couple's massage package. You cannot travel to this area and avoid using the spa; the entire tourism industry here is centered on the therapeutic nature of the Dead Sea. Hotels spend fortunes (and charge them) to create some of the best spa facilities on the planet. Massage rooms, Jacuzzis and a variety of hot tubs, saunas, steam rooms, all the amenities needed to ensure your utmost comfort and relaxation are found in the Dead Sea resort areas. I am normally bashful about spas (um, portly people usually tend to be), but the old adage 'when in Rome' definitely applies in this case. Besides, you'll be in great company. King Herod, the Ptolemies of Egypt, heck, even Cleopatra dipped her bodacious booty in these waters. In other words, forget the rock star, you can party like a Pharaoh! I decided I would pay the 15 Jordanian dinars and avail myself of the spa facilities at the hotel when we got back from our morning excursion (my bashfulness prevented me from getting a full-body massage, though).

By 9:30am our group met in the lobby and proceeded to the bus, traveling roughly thirty minutes north along the Dead Sea Highway until we reached Bethany-Beyond-the-Jordan. This religious site is located right on the border with Israel, across from the famed city of Jericho. Security is incredibly tight along the border, despite the 1994 peace accords between Jordan and Israel. Relationships are obviously better now than in the past, with much more cooperation between the former foes, but often times the unresolved Palestinian statehood issue mars this relationship. The Israelis do not seem in a hurry to grant the Palestinians a state, which angers the Jordanian government, and for more reasons than one. Half of the Jordanian population share similar ethnic roots with the Palestinians. But Muslim and ethnic solidarity aside, I don't think the Jordanian government wants rebellious Palestinians crossing into their country fomenting problems here at home. It's bad enough they have to deal with possible ISIS terrorists spreading amongst the growing Syrian refugee population, the last thing they need are Palestinian terrorists on this side of the border, too. So security is a serious concern. As we toured the site, we saw barbed-wire fencing stretching out along the border with pillboxes on top of hills manned with unseen Jordanian military snipers and machine gunners. Who knew *what* the Israelis had on their side! One thing was fairly certain, though: anyone attempting to cross the border illegally would most likely be shot dead.

From the Dead Sea Highway we made a left turn through a farming community, stopping once at a military checkpoint. To our right, in an adjacent field, were the telltale tents of a Bedouin tribe with their herd of

sheep nearby. Hazim told us that groups of Bedouin often settle in the region to do harvesting work before moving on. We stopped briefly at the top of a hill overlooking Bethany-Beyond-the-Jordan (known locally as Al-Maghtas), with mosaics and inscriptions outlining the religious events that transpired here, and a rudimentary map of the site. Not being an overtly religious person myself, I had never heard of this place, and according to Hazim it's only recently that the site has been actively promoted as a tourism destination. *Boy, were we in for a surprise!*

Like many religious sites (especially those connected to miracles), Bethany-Beyond-the-Jordan has its detractors, but technically, this is the place where John the Baptist supposedly preached, performed baptisms, met with the Levites who investigated his ministry, and baptized Jesus. In the Talmud and in the New Testament, the area where John the Baptist preached was referred to as *Bethabara* (which means 'house of the ford, place of crossing' implying the Jordan River), the Gospel of John referred to the place as *Bethany* (a spot 'beyond the Jordan' river). Biblical scholars believe the two names reference the same location, which, according to recent excavations, seem to indicate the likely place is here, in Al-Maghtas (or Bethany-Beyond-the-Jordan).

Biblical scholars have disagreed on the whereabouts of this site for years, contending that it was east of the river in Judea (a small Roman province incorporating what is now Israel and the Palestinian territories), or along the river itself. But in the 1990s, a mine clearing operation on this side of the Jordan River revealed the remains of an ancient church with baptism pools built on a spot situated exactly where the *Map of Madaba* indicates the baptism of Jesus occurred. Subsequent excavations at the site have convinced many archaeologists that Bethany-Beyond-the-Jordan is authentic. The arguments for the site are numerous. First, the Jordan River's current would have been too strong for frequent ritualized baptisms, and the scriptures refer to the place as being beyond the river but at the same time connected to it. This fits perfectly since the Wadi Kharrar next to the site contains a small tributary of the Jordan River that is fed by several springs believed to be the source of the water for the baptism pools at Bethany-Beyond-the-Jordan. Secondly, the Byzantines built churches (thousands of them in Jordan alone) throughout the region commemorating religious events from the bible, these churches are important to biblical scholars because they often pinpoint where miracles took place. Remember, the Byzantines are the descendents of the earlier Romans who lived through this

period and would have known, more or less, where such events supposedly occurred. And just fifty yards from the Jordan River (which is technically 'beyond the Jordan') they built three chapels – all three destroyed by floods or fire – on the site dedicated to the baptism of Jesus. Archaeologists have excavated remains from all three churches at Bethany-Beyond-the-Jordan, and this general area is now regarded (by a growing number of scholars) to be the most likely spot where Jesus was baptized. *Wow*.

Bethany-Beyond-the-Jordan is also believed to be the site of two other miracles from the Holy Scriptures. This is supposedly the area where Joshua led the Israelites (with the Ark of the Covenant) across the Jordan River after the water flow was 'divinely restrained' so they could pass on dry land into Jericho. The other miracle was the ascension to Heaven of the Prophet Elijah, who was whisked up in a chariot of fire. I'm not sure how biblical scholars have determined that this place was connected to those other two events, it seems to be more of a Byzantine tradition based on their interpretation of certain scriptures, such as the one that states Elijah ascended on the 'other side of the Jordan'.

We followed a road leading down to the baptism site, stopping first to visit a small hill (known as Elijah's Hill) where archaeologists have uncovered the remains of several Christian structures. This is the site where the Byzantines believed the miracle of Elijah's ascension occurred. At the bottom of the hill, next to a dense thicket of tamarisk, willow and Euphrates poplar trees, is the excavated remains of the Rhotorios Monastery, a large Byzantine church built during the 6th century, the mosaic floor includes a cross in the shape of diamonds and a Greek inscription, the apse has a black stone symbolizing Elijah's fiery ascent up to Heaven. As you go up the hill on the eastern side of the Rhotorios Monastery you encounter several baptism pools and a deep well. On the western side of the monastery are the remains of two smaller churches. Approaching the top of the hill you find the remains of a water system, including a large cistern used to fill all the pools at the site, and the remnants of a large prayer hall with some fragments of a mosaic floor still visible. At the very top of Elijah's Hill is a structure called the Church of the Arch, also known as the Church of John Paul II after he performed mass here during his visit in March of 2000. Basically, the structure is a platform over an excavated mosaic, an arch was constructed over it in 1999 made out of 63 stones to commemorate the death of King Hussein who was 63 years old when he died.

After touring Elijah's Hill we boarded the bus and drove further down towards the Jordan River, stopping at a clearing where we continued on foot along a special covered wooden trail built specifically for Pope Francis' visit to the site in 2014, surrounded by purple bougainvillea. Beyond this trail we trekked along a gravel path through what the Prophet Jeremiah once described as 'the jungle of the Jordan', a wooded section thick with reeds and tamarisk bushes, with the sound of running streams, insects and birds all around us. The thin, meandering flow of what remains of the once mighty Jordan River was hidden behind the foliage on our left, the river reduced now to a fraction of its former self due to increased water usage by both Israeli and Jordanian farmers further north. After about ten minutes we reached another clearing with a modern pool and the ruins of the three chapels built by the Byzantines during the 5th and 6th centuries to commemorate the site where Jesus was baptized.

The chapels were built one on top of the other, and have been excavated in parts, revealing mosaic flooring, stairwells, support pillars and marble tiles with hexagonal shapes that were the hallmark of Byzantine churches that denoted a sacred place where the Savior had been. The first two chapels suffered severe flooding, and the third chapel – constructed on a higher elevation – caught fire. After this, the Byzantines thought that perhaps God was sending them a message and they opted not to build any more chapels here. On the lower level, a marble staircase leads from the apse to the Spring of John the Baptist, a small pool of water that, according to all the hype, is ***the*** place where Jesus was dipped in the water. Even if this wasn't the *actual* spot where Jesus was baptized, it becomes apparent – if the archaeologists and biblical scholars are correct – that it wasn't very far from here, so there is a feeling of awe when you see the site. We walked around the pool and visited the two chapels atop the small hill. The lower chapel and the actual spring were off-limits, but Hazim spoke to one of the caretakers after seeing some VIPs being allowed in, and we were given a few minutes access to scoop up the sacred water and have our pictures taken at the baptism site before moving on. From here we continued down to the Jordan River, passing a series of cliffs in the distance with caves that are believed to have housed/hidden the followers of John the Baptist. Archaeologists have found human remains and other artifacts inside these caves, which are still being explored and excavated today.

The trail of Bethany-Beyond-the-Jordan ends at the southern tip of the Jordan River. We made our way down a short flight of stairs to a wooden

platform on the Jordanian edge of the river, across from us, a stone's throw away on the opposite side of the riverbank, was the State of Israel. The river was not very wide, and apparently not too deep, either. On the Israeli side a group of African-American tourists (or pilgrims) were baptizing themselves in the water, splashing about and having a spiritually merry ole time, while several rifle-toting Israeli soldiers kept a watchful eye. It was a weird moment; we stood on our side of the Jordan River taking photos of the tourists on the other side, and vice-versa. Most of us removed our shoes and socks and sat at the river's edge to dip our feet in the famed waterway. The small muddy river resembled a chocolate-colored stream, nothing like I had envisioned. A bit disappointing, really, especially when I had to wipe all that mud off my feet to put my socks back on. Luckily, Paul had brought along some extra disposable towelettes. We went back up the staircase and stopped to visit a new Orthodox Church dedicated to John the Baptist not far from the river. It was not very large, a two-chamber affair with a golden dome and decorated with murals, frescoes and icons of Jesus and Orthodox saints. Next to the altar was a container with the remains of early Christians found in the nearby caves.

Our tour of Bethany-Beyond-the-Jordan concluded, we returned to the bus and headed back to the Marriott. Before we left the area, though, we stopped momentarily at the Bedouin campsite to take some pictures. I thought the Bedouins would have found us intrusive, but they smiled and waved for the most part. We reached the Marriott by 12:45pm. This was the last time we would be seeing Hazim and our driver, Hussam. Those who hadn't already done so took the time to hand them envelopes filled with tip money. Hussam was a great driver, a stout and jovial man who reminded me of everyone's favorite uncle. Hazim, as far as I was concerned, was a fantastic guide, a true professional with a great sense of humor and wonderful people skills. I thanked him for a great tour and promised to send him a copy of this journal online. Before the group split up in the hotel lobby, I spoke to Greg and Maui and a few of the others and we agreed to meet at 6:00pm for dinner. I then headed up to my room to change clothes.

I donned my bathing trunks and slipped on a black T-shirt. Prior to heading downstairs I called the front desk to inquire about towels and the use of the spa. I was told the access fee for the spa would be charged to my room and that towels would be provided within the facility and at poolside. I placed my wallet and camera in a plastic bag and headed for the pool terrace. Before hitting the spa I wanted to experience floating in the Dead Sea. I

made my way down to the shoreline and was disappointed to discover (in the light of day) that the 'beach' consisted of a strip of broken pebbles and jagged rocks that extended into the water. The Dead Sea was quite choppy that day, the waves crashing onto the shore with enough force to make trudging into the salty water even more laborious. I removed my sneakers and socks and attempted to reach the waterline, but when my feet touched the uneven pebble-strewn shore I cringed in pain. I realized there was no way I could continue. Not far from me was a young couple smearing mud over each other's bodies; the man saw the difficulty I was having trying to reach the waterline and told me that the spa had an indoor pool filled with water from the Dead Sea. The idea struck me as an excellent Plan B. I thanked the couple and headed back up the stairs. Before entering the spa, which is situated next to the large outdoor pool, I stopped to take some photos of the Dead Sea in the afternoon sun. The earlier cloud cover had dissipated and the water sparkled with a magnificent deep blue color. It was so beautiful.

Thousands of years ago people came to the Dead Sea for the same reason they still come today, to experience the healing powers of the minerals within its water and mud. King Herod turned this area into one of the world's first health resorts. In addition, the Dead Sea provides a wide variety of natural products like potash (a potassium-laden salt used in fertilizers, the bleaching of textiles and in the production of glass and soaps). The ancient Egyptians used asphalt from here for their mummification process. Women throughout the centuries have been using cosmetics fashioned from the salt and minerals of the Dead Sea, not to mention the medicinal scents and ointments. The 'sea' is actually a salt lake, and with a depth of 304 meters (997 feet) it is the deepest such lake in the world. It has a salinity of over 34%, making it nine times saltier than the ocean. The Dead Sea is nestled within the Jordan Rift Valley separating Israel and the Palestinian Territories from Jordan; its length is 50 kilometers with a width that reaches up to 15 kilometers at one point. Because of the high saline content nothing can grow or live in its waters, hence the name the Dead Sea.

The reason for the unusual salinity of the water is due to several factors. Currently, at 430 meters below sea level, the Dead Sea is the lowest *land* point on earth, this low elevation makes for very hot mean temperatures during the summer months, causing a high rate of evaporation. There is no outlet for this lake; its major tributary is the Jordan River. During the 1950's, both Israeli and Jordanian farmers began to use the upper Jordan River to

irrigate their fields, diverting the water that flowed downstream. A hundred years ago roughly 1.2 trillion liters of water a year gushed into the Dead Sea to replenish it, but today, only about 10% of that amount trickles into the lake. This has caused the Dead Sea to evaporate at a quicker pace. The potash industries on the southern end of the Dead Sea region further exacerbate this evaporation process. In fact, large sinkholes have opened up on the Israeli side that occasionally swallows people and trucks whole. Basically, the lake is disappearing, and at an alarming rate, according to environmentalists. If nothing is done soon the Dead Sea could become extinct over the next four or five decades. There are plans for a pipeline from the Gulf of Aqaba to the southern shores of the Dead Sea to replenish the water. This pipeline would also be used to produce hydroelectricity and include a desalination plant to provide potable water for the region. But all of this comes with a cost to the local environment, as well. Hopefully, something will be worked out and the Dead Sea can be saved for future generations.

I entered the spa and approached the cheery employee behind the front counter. Based on her accent I knew she was from the Philippines. Throughout the tour I noticed that many hotel employees were Filipinos. I spent five and a half years living in the Philippines (first as a Peace Corps Volunteer then as a private citizen teaching world history) and I am somewhat fluent in one of their dialects called *Chavacano*, which is spoken only in the province of Zamboanga City on the island of Mindanao. Because of the lack of good job opportunities in their own country, many Filipinos – who tend to be fluent in English – seek work abroad. In the twenty-four years since I left the Philippines I have met thousands of Filipinos all over the world, yet almost none of them have hailed from Zamboanga City, so I rarely get to use my *Chavacano* language skills, which is quite frustrating. It's like being fluent in *Latin*.

Instead of charging my room, I opted to pay the spa fee in cash. The pretty employee gave me a personal tour of the facility, and then handed me an over-sized white cotton towel and a pair of rubber slippers and pointed me in the direction of the locker rooms. I was given a key to my own locker where I stored my wallet, camera, sneakers, socks and T-shirt. I immediately headed over to one of the tiled rooms containing a small oval pool filled with water from the Dead Sea. Incredibly, out of all the guests in the hotel, I was the only person using the spa facility at that time. *I was in Fat Boy Heaven*! Not sure how deep the pool was I slowly lowered myself using the

metal ladder. The sensation of this salty water on my body felt weird, it seemed to press against my skin trying to stop my every movement. Just standing in the water took some effort; no sooner than I lifted one leg to take a step and – *whoop!* – it popped up involuntarily and soon I was bobbing up and down on the surface of the pool like a human cork. THIS WAS SO COOL! No matter what I did, I couldn't sink. I would gently push against the edge of the pool and slowly jettison myself to the other side lying on my back. I was able to spin myself in the center of the pool like I was floating in zero gravity. Unbelievable. There's no point in trying to swim in this water because it feels as if you're sitting on an invisible raft. Surprisingly, though, every year somebody drowns trying to swim in the Dead Sea. Don't ask me how that's possible. Apparently, it's not recommended to lie in the water stomach down, which is what swimmers do. Another thing you don't want to do is get this water in your eyes, it stings like the dickens, and for a very long time.

I must have spent thirty minutes in the pool before the novelty wore off. I stood underneath a nearby showerhead and washed the salt water from my body and then headed over to one of several hot tubs in the facility. This one was next to a large in-door pool with panoramic windows facing the back terrace of the hotel. I sat in the tub and pressed a button along the wall and soon the whole thing was bubbling like cauldron of boiling soup. Powerful streams of water shot out from holes lining the tub, massaging my back and shoulders. I raised my feet up to the stream and gave my poor puppies some much needed relief! From here, I alternated using the sauna and steam rooms, took another hot tub dip and then finally showered before returning to my room. I was loose as a goose. In fact, I took a delightful two hour nap. When I awoke, I made coffee and repacked my suitcase (I had a very early morning flight back to Frankfurt, and the hotel pick-up van was scheduled for 10:30pm that evening).

By 6:00pm I was down in the lobby where I met Paul, John, Richard, Greg and Maui for dinner. We decided to take a stroll over to the Samarah Mall (several blocks from our hotel) and dine in one of their restaurants. We had to pass the King Hussein Bin Talal Convention Center (which is managed by the Hilton Corporation); there must have been some kind of event going on because security was intense, with armored personnel vehicles and plenty of soldiers and police milling about. The Samarah Mall, by comparison, was practically empty. We walked several floors, window browsing the fashionable shops, trying to decide on a suitable restaurant for

our final meal in Jordan. They had some interesting choices, like Rovers Return, an English-style pub, and a chicken joint called Buffalo Wings and Rings, but in the end we agreed that since this was our last night we should stick to something Middle Eastern. We chose a place on the first floor of the mall called the Ocean Restaurant, specializing in Lebanese cuisine. The food was great. I ordered the lamb chop served with cinnamon-spiced rice topped with toasted almonds and a Greek salad. Greg, Richard and John each ordered a side of fries with their meals so there was plenty to share. We had a wonderful time, a nice way to end our trip. Afterwards, we took a brief walk around the mall while Maui helped Richard shop for a gift for his girlfriend back home. Maui pointed out some nice bracelets and necklaces, but Richard didn't really see anything he liked. I have a funny feeling his girlfriend's response when he arrived home *empty-handed* was similar to the one I had in Petra: **D'oh**!

We got back to the hotel shortly after 8:30pm. We said our final 'goodbyes', promising to keep in touch. On the way back to my room I ran into Sig and Susan and we sat briefly in the lobby discussing the highlights of the tour. Back in my room I changed into my 'flying' clothes (a pair of blue jeans and my last clean buttoned shirt) and did some final repacking. By 10:00pm I went down to the lobby to wait for the taxi van. Nine of us were scheduled for this pick-up. By 10:30pm, Mike and Teri opted to take a regular taxi to the airport. A few minutes later, Sig, Susan, Gail, Steve, Sakina, Mazhar and myself piled into a taxi van and were on our way, as well. It took us just under an hour to reach the airport; I kept nodding off during the ride.

When we pulled up to the terminal building the same Gate 1 representative who met me when I first arrived was waiting for us. He took one look at me and his face lit up with an enormous smile (remember, I had tipped him $20). Apparently, my previous generosity served me well, for no sooner than we entered the departure terminal this man pulled me aside and escorted me to the Lufthansa counter and personally intervened with the ticketing agent, getting me my boarding pass and luggage squared away in what had to be record time. Meanwhile, my fellow tour members had to wait on a long line at their respective check-in counters. I gave the man the last of my Jordanian dinars and once again he thanked me profusely.

I waited near my departure gate for the next two and a half hours, at times running into Sig and Susan or Mike and Teri. I won't bore you with the

tedious details of my trip home, suffice it to say that my Lufthansa flights (both in Jordan and in Frankfurt) left on time. Security was even tighter than before, though, probably due to the earlier bombing in Ankara, Turkey. I was asked for my passport three times before boarding each flight. I arrived in Miami in the early afternoon, after more than twenty hours of combined waiting and flying time. It's always nice to come home…except for the horrendous lines at Customs and Immigration.

I had scheduled the rest of the week off from work, and spent a good deal of that time organizing my photos and telling family and friends about my trip. I began writing this journal ten days after I got back, but it took more than two months to finish. Perhaps I got a little carried away. In my own defense, I knew very little about Jordan and needed to do quite a bit of research to put this thing together. The details in my journals are important to me, for they will serve as my future memories, to remind me of the things I saw and did throughout my travels. And now that I have finished the journal, my trip to Jordan is complete. This chapter of my life is officially closed. I have sent copies to all my fellow tour members as my way of saying 'thank you' for their companionship. When all is said and done, it's the people who make the trip, and this group was a fun bunch. Thank you all for a wonderful tour.

My visit to Jordan will always be remembered fondly. Petra was every bit as exciting as I had imagined. But even more, the rest of the sites proved to be just as amazing. The Roman ruins, the medieval castles, the religious sites, the fascinating Wadi Rum, and on and on. Jordan is such a fantastic place to visit. The people are so friendly and hospitable. The food is delicious. The history intriguing. By all means, dear reader, take the journey, you won't regret it.

Until next time, may all your caravans be pointing in the right direction…

Richard C. Rodriguez

(my trip to Jordan occurred between March 7 and March 15, 2016)