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Bucket List Bonanza: Petra's Ancient Pagan Sites Inspired Indiana Jones and Lawrence of Arabia

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BUCKET LIST BONANZA: PETRA'S ANCIENT PAGAN SITES INSPIRED INDIANA JONES AND LAWRENCE OF ARABIA

By Philip Eliasoph

IF YOU ARE GAME TO BE TRANSPORTED back into antiquity along a magic carpet - (and a short bumpy ride with our dromedary camel named 'Alice') - then start mapping out your visit to Petra, Jordan. 'Smithsonian Magazine' listed the ancient natural sanctuary as one of the "28 Places to See Before You Die." And yet, some Yankee tourists remain skeptical about terrorism, personal safety, or ending up blinded in a sandstorm like Peter O'Toole in "Lawrence of Arabia."

Petra's fatally gorgeous geographical location in the always ready to explode middle east caused much anxiety even for the most intrepid explorers. Now the good news: relax - this is a safe, secure, cakewalk. Now being visited by almost one million visitors per year, there's much safety in numbers. Jordan has distinguished itself as the only 'safe haven' at present for American tourists who want to explore beyond Israel's borders. Streaming in open air desert jeeps, private luxury vans, and larger tour buses is a multitude of uber-security conscious Israelis, American Christian pilgrimage Holy Land tours and Jewish families on holidays re-connecting to Israel's infinite wonders.

Recollecting the jaw dropping revelation in Spielberg's 1989 "Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade" of ancient Petra's temples, it's been high on my bucket list. For Harrison Ford it was merely rescuing the Holy Grail from nefarious Nazi thieves. About an hour away is the mindblowing 'Wadi Rum' famously used as the surrealistic, moonscape

setting for the Academy Award winning film, "Lawrence of Arabia." If you too sat in your local theatre dripping bad, oily buttered popcorn across your sweater watching these adventure classics - then get ready to star in your own unforgettable trip to a Biblical era never-never-land.

Established in 312 BCE as the capital of a pre-Islamic pagan cult known as the Nabateans, Petra lies within a breathtaking basin along mountains in the ancient the Med/Dead/Red Sea Triangle. Prospering by default for travelers in the region enjoying their religious pilgrimages to the shared holy sites of Judaism, Christianity or Islam shaping the monotheistic faiths of the west, Petra is imbued

with the spirit of pagan worship. Arriving at Petra's Al-Khazneh - "The Treasury" - will be a moment I will take to the grave with a smile. Imagining that Greco-Roman columns, pediments, and arches found their way to this primeval hidden gorge makes one proud of our human ancestry.

Just itching to see this 1985 listed UNESCO World Heritage Site before my old football knee prohibits me from walking for several hours down into the Wadi Musa. The vast Petra Archaeological Park is a psychedelic encounter with now extinct gods and goddesses who once ruled the temples of nature's sanctuaries.

Carry extra layers and down parkas in your rucksack as temperature changes by as much as 30 degrees once you descend into the chilly lower depths of the pink-hued sandstone gorge.



There's plenty of water, minted tea, pita and hummus snacks sold by local Bedouins at rest cafes at the bottom. You can 'negotiate' [a polite way of saying hassle] with one of the camel-jockey attendants for a quick snapshot or an extended ride on a menagerie of animals right out of Noah's ark. US dollars are the currency of choice - so have a thick wad of green cash ready.

Be prepared to be approached by annoying souvenir vendors who catch your eye with their so-called "ancient coins" - which look like they were stamped out of a tin machine in northern China last week. As for all the rest of the "authentic" scarves, camel saddles, or hand-woven rugs, *Caveat emptor*. My only real complaint is that Jordan's Ministry of Antiquities has not vigilantly monitored this sacred area with more vigilance allowing these P.T. Barnum 'antiquities dealers' to have unlimited access to unsuspecting tourists with Indiana Jones' 'lost treasures' in their minds.

You have to be able to walk with a spring in your step to navigate the 'wadi' [a sharply cut river gorge from sudden downpours] and have enough energy to climb back up a steep incline to the top. No worries - for those who simply are out of gas - local Bedouins run a horse and buggy trade and will drive you back up to the village. No doubt this influx of tourists has transformed their stone-aged habits into 21st century digital comforts. For the 15 minute carriage ride they extract about \$30. Considering that many Bedouins survive in tents on less than \$100 a month, this is clearly one of those scams you just roll your eyes accepting as sketchy tourist-based usury.

Amidst the rampant destruction and tragic inhumanity of neighboring Syria, and continuing unrest in the region since the falsely announced 'Arab Spring,' Jordan has marvelously proven to be the calm 'eye of the hurricane' in its acceptance of co-existence with Israel. American visitors can select two gateways to the remote, isolated region in southern Jordan. If you are in Jerusalem, there are taxi and mini-van transfers from the Damascus Gate for the 40 minute ride out to the King Hussein Crossing (the old British mandate era Allenby Bridge).

Since Jordan and Israel have agreed it's best to live harmoniously with an enduring peace agreement signed in October 1994 on the White House lawn, Petra's splendors were opened to the world. This diplomatic triumph allowed nearly one million visitors annually to its Wonder of the Ancient World: the archaeological rock-rot rose colored sandstone capital of the mysterious Nabateans.

If holy sites in Israel from the footsteps of Abraham, King David, Jesus and his Apostles - are not your priority, there's plenty to enjoy at the Red Sea resort paradise of Eilat. Perched at Israel's southernmost tip is this Las Vegas meets Miami Beach resort complex surrounding purple and pink mountains. King Solomon's Mines are just 20 minutes north of town. In this arid landscape Egyptian metallurgists 3,000 years ago smelted copper. We enjoyed a picnic lunch on a stone terrace that could have been the Sea of Tranquility on the Moon.

Like Israel itself, you can expect the unexpected: past and present; mediocre garb to eyebrow raising exhibitionism along Eilat's beach promenade. Russian immigrants stroll around shamelessly in mini-bikinis with their sagging genital packages, young Israeli soldiers live in the moment carrying their



Intrepid desert explorers and even luxury day-trippers surely feel they are at the 'end of the world' at Petra. First opened to Europeans in 1812 by Swiss adventurer Johann Burckhardt, he called the magical place a "rose-red city half as old as time." Highlight is the sandstone "Al Khazneh" - The Treasury - possibly carved from living rock in 309 B.C. and elevated as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1985.

weapons like tennis racquet bags, while Orthodox Jews seem to think they are in a kosher designed South Beach offering falafel. At one café table Israeli start up entrepreneurs are designing software for patents in Silicon valley and the next table we see sunburned Holocaust survivors sipping latte espressos with Auschwitz tattoos fading on their prune dried forearms. No words - just head shaking awe.

My initial visit to Eilat was on our honeymoon in 1972 when we stayed in primitive trailers, and took showers at communal facilities. This was a time of the "wild west" just after the Six Day War era - with etched memories of attractive Scandinavian college kids in the bathing facilities *la naturelle* like a scene from an early Ingmar Bergman film. From Eilat you will be transferred by an Israeli guide to the welcoming Itzhak Rabin Peace Crossing, named for the assassinated Israeli prime minister who brokered peace with King Hussein.

After paying your \$40 visa fees to bored, chain smoking Jordanian border authorities, we were met by a perfectly pitched and informed guide. With his George Clooney looks catching the attention of our female safari mates -Yael, Toby, and Ronit - we were whooshed off by Mr. Ziad, in a luxury van for an exhilarating day trip. You can return to your hotel back into Israel by early evening. Eilat has world class dining enjoy grilled fish or tender marinated lamb kabobs al fresco while watching a Miro-esque moon rise over the pink mountains of Saudi Arabia in the distance.

Exhausted but energized, we said *adieu* to Petra. From our balcony at our Disneyland hotel in Eilat we watched the moonrise over the Red Sea. Thoughts of a softly tinted, orange-lavender- Mark Rothko inspired palette of Petra lingered. The exquisite afternoon light in the archaeology park sparked a kaleidoscopic spectrum of striations. From this rainbow display of 700 million year old rock formations, who would need any other visible evidence that divinity exists within us and everywhere? ☐

Travel tips: for Israel - contact: www.goisrael.com; for Jordan - www.visitjordan.com; for some personally approved trustworthy guides: Israel - US born Joel Rosenfeld, joel@isram.co.il; for Eilat and King Solomon's copper mines, South African born Colin Porter, coll545@gmail.com; for Jordan, archaeology, desert jeep tours, etc. contact Ziad Obaidat, ziadobaidat@hotmail.com. Seasonal conditions: best to visit between November and May; summer months temperatures in Eilat and Jordan can reach 110 with a dry "hamsin" desert wind.