

March 2012

Dear Friends and Family,

Hi, it's me again with the second half of my six weeks' trip, this time in Jordan and Egypt. After the three weeks in Ethiopia, a combination of timeless Africa and an introduction to the historic period of trade between Asia and the Mediterranean, it was time to probe some of those ancient civilizations.

The first stop was Jordan where after a wonderful afternoon at Al Pasha Turkish Bath in Amman to soak off three weeks of aggressive travel, I spent a day at Jerash.

This is perhaps the most fully preserved greco-roman ruin in the middle east, with the entire central city from hippodrome to forum to commercial viaduct and temples largely in tact. Here I learned



about paving stones laid diagonally so as not to trap chariots' wheels and the origin of our standard road width (18') to let two chariots pass. The underground storm drainage system reminded me of how long it took us to re-invent what the Roman engineers already knew!

In the Church of St Cosmos and St Damianus, in memory of twin brothers (doctors) who devoted themselves to care of the poor, I saw the first of many mosaic floors throughout the region.

These and others in the churches of Jerash are well preserved from the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries. Many more of these beautiful floors are at Mt Nebo (where Moses is reportedly buried) plus the map of the Holy Land from Egypt to Palestine from 560 AD in St George's Greek Orthodox church in Madaba (the floor was originally part of the Byzantine church located underneath) and, even more to my surprise, at a Byzantine church in Petra where I watched restoration work in progress. I stopped at a handicapped workshop originally sponsored by Queen Noor and saw how the mosaics are made (upside down backed by glued fabric which is peeled off after installation).



Not all mosaics are for floors, but also wall art and décor items.

But back to Jerash (known historically as Gerasa) which was not on a trade route but flourished due to its rich agricultural land. Occupied as early as Neolithic times, the first major settlement was Greek during the time of Alexander the Great (333 BC) but it really developed under the Romans from 64 BC until the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century AD. The public city stretches almost 2 km from Hadrian's Arch (1<sup>st</sup> C AD) and the hippodrome to the



north gate and includes an impressive oval forum (90 m by 80 m), theaters, a colonnaded commercial route and impressive temples later converted to churches when the Roman Empire adopted Christianity (324 AD).

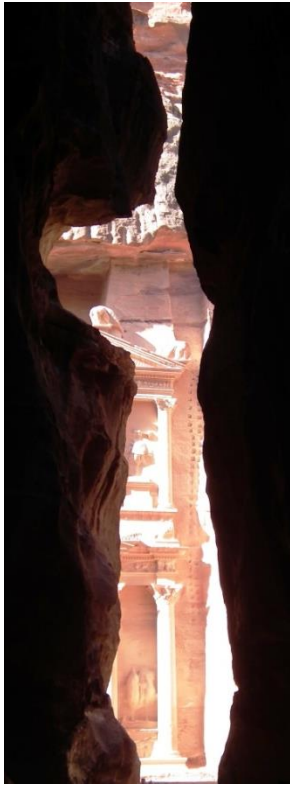
The former residential areas lie beneath modern Jerash to the east, but due to the hilly topography you can really view the whole layout and envision its vibrancy in its heyday. I had the good luck to be there late in the day when the light was great for photos. I was particularly taken by the temple to Artemis with its huge forecourt of columns.



The next day, transitioning from the lush fertile land of the north to the barren mountainous terrain in the south, put in perspective the wanderings/migrations of Jews, Gentiles, Christians and Muslims in these lands in ancient times!



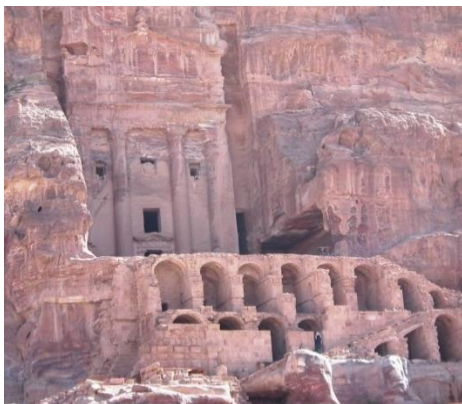
I arrived in Petra in early evening to Beit Zaman, reconstruction of a former Ottoman stone village now converted into a luxury hotel with indoor heated swimming pool. Unfortunately, the Turkish baths I was hoping for in Petra were closed due to the extreme lack of tourists! However, that was good news for my day-long visit to Petra (less crowds) but a very sad situation for the local population who depend on tourism for their livelihoods (this was an even bigger problem in Egypt). As suggested in all the guidebooks start out early to catch a sliver of the bright sunlit Treasury façade while still inside the almost dark, narrow approach (Siq).



Perhaps what surprised me most about Petra is how recent some of the discoveries are (tombs under the Treasury only in 2003) and that archeologists assume 90% remains to be uncovered! My tour guide, Ahmed, was an archeologist who worked on excavation of soldiers' tombs from 1 BC – 1 AD. Again, I was impressed by the engineering with clay water pipes carrying drinking water to the City along both sides of the Siq, and a dam at the entrance to divert the adjacent stream through tunnels so



as not to flood the City.



Here I had my first taste of sage tea, which was delicious. I forgot to mention that I was given cold hibiscus tea when in the Jacuzzi at the Turkish bath which is supposed to be good for blood pressure. I had this often again in Egypt and brought some home.

A word about language and food. I tried to use my Moroccan Arabic and to understand theirs. I think because Jordan is made up mostly of people from elsewhere in the Arabic-speaking world, Palestinians, Iraqis, Syrians, Egyptians, they were very patient and generally understood my efforts!

The food was plentiful and fabulous – even after the Ethiopian dishes which I had so enjoyed. Not as much use of chili pepper here, but fresh – Jordan and next-door Syria are famous for vegetables and fruits. I was treated to mansaf for lunch one day which literally is used as a word to mean “in a while” because it takes so long to cook (it also took me all night to digest as it was so filling!).



My next stop was the western deserts of Egypt where I could not understand a word of Arabic except numbers and greetings and my Bedouin driver cooked great simple food (grilled chicken, local rice, vegetables) over an open fire and we slept under the stars.



The oases here are amazing – the sheer quantities of water from the springs and the irrigation systems resulting in lush agriculture and communities supporting up to 70,000 (Dakhla) people each.



Fayoum (2 million people), about an hour west of Cairo has a huge lake, Qarum, which was a vacation spot for Pharaohs in ancient times and remains an escape for Caireans today. Further on at Wadi Rayyan was an interesting phenomenon where the excess water from the oasis has been channeled into depressions in the desert and stocked with fish.

The site of our first overnight is Wadi al Hitan. In case you have any doubt that the Sahara was once under water, whale skeletons dating back 40 million years were uncovered here in 1902 and it is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site open air museum.



After the wonderful meal mentioned above, and a nocturnal visit by a perfectly camouflaged fox, we slept on rag rugs in the open covered with heavy Bedouin blankets. About midnight an incredible wind/sand storm blew in of the sort one reads about. I was happy I was on dry land – not on a boat – and with an experienced, well-equipped Bedouin driver, but I did not sleep at all. At first day light it took all the strength



of the driver and the guide to break camp in the wind and re-load our Toyota Land Cruiser. We then drove two hours across the desert blinded by the storm to reach the paved road. I was remembering some of the steep cliffs we had traversed the day before and had no idea how our driver knew to avoid them! There were no electricity, radio, nor cell phone coverage in this area.

Several hours further on we arrived at Bahariya Oasis. This oasis has been agriculturally important



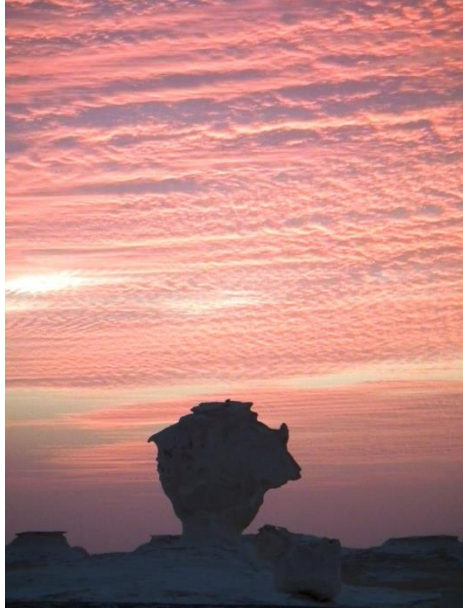
since Pharaonic times and still has villages of clusters of mud brick houses surrounded by palm groves. The water in the motel shower came from the adjacent hot spring and we visited Black Mountain with a former British WWI outpost. After a delicious early dinner I slept a long night!

South of here we entered into first the Black Desert followed by the amazing

white desert where we camped again.



Again it was wonderful to be remote – no electric poles or cell phone towers. Tonight I thrilled to a magnificent desert sunset followed by rise of a full moon.



In the white desert, in addition to the unique rock formations some of which one could imagine shaped as animals, the area that we camped in looked like an ocean with white caps that had been frozen in motion.



The vastness was difficult to capture with the camera. We had a fox visitor this night also but otherwise saw no wildlife.



Return to civilization – Cairo, Coptic Cairo, the Pyramids and then a wonderful, peaceful Nile cruise from Luxor to Aswan – just what was needed after 5 weeks of travel.

As we visit the temples and monuments heading up the Nile one has to constantly visualize what they would have been like with the full colors of their frescoes intact (Abu Simbel comes closest but no photography permitted inside).

After checking in to our cruise ship at Luxor (I am now joined by a friend) we visited Karnak Temples and Luxor Temple, from which the obelisk at Place de la Concorde in Paris was taken in the early 19<sup>th</sup> C as a gift to the people of France from ruler Mohammed Ali. The 2 km avenue of



sphinxes connecting Karnak and Luxor temples has been cleared of houses, mosques and churches and is being excavated! (Egypt takes its archeological heritage seriously.)

We motored the afternoon passing through the lock at Esna and tied up at Edfu for the night.

First thing in the morning we visited the Temple of Horus – the largest, best-preserved Ptolemaic temple in Egypt, dating from 237 BC. Then a leisurely motor to the Temple of Kom Ombo – unique because of its perfect symmetry, the left side dedicated to falcon God Haroeris (Horus the elder) and the right side to Sobek, local crocodile god.



Interestingly, hieroglyphics can be read either right to left or left to right – look for the direction heads are facing. In this temple, at the exact center the hieroglyphics change direction. There is also the ancient calendar of 3x10 days equaling one month, then four months equaling one season plus five days of holidays (=365). In the evening we arrived in Aswan.

The next day we visited the very interesting Philae temple relocated (42,000 individual pieces) between 1964 and 1972 after construction of the Aswan High Dam since its former location is now under water six months of the year. This temple has Egypt's last hieroglyphs with scenes of Roman Emperor

Trajan burning incense in front of Osiris and Isis before conversion of the Roman empire to Christianity.



In the afternoon I opted to motor to a typical Nubian village with their domed structures and local market where I bought my hibiscus tea.



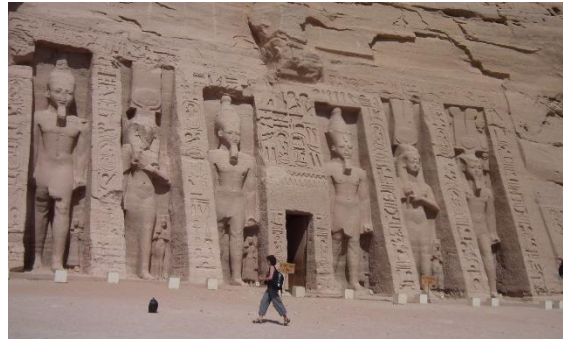
However, this meant that I did not visit Aswan which is a very interesting city full of souks and islands. Here the desert is adjacent to the Nile.

En route it felt as if the agricultural life along the Nile hadn't changed in millennia with very little equipment in use, mostly still donkeys and oxen. The pace was commensurate with our slow voyage up the Nile, very relaxing.





The final history leg of this trip was to fly to Abu Simbel to see the 13<sup>th</sup> C BC great temple that was moved 210 m back from and 65 m above the original position due to the encroachment of Lake Nasser formed by the high dam. Buried in sand for centuries, the temples were only rediscovered in 1813 and the colors inside are amazingly bright! (No photos of course.) In the inner sanctuary two days per year the sun reaches the statues – engineers calculated the relocation to preserve this phenomenon – it just happens one day later. These temples were well worth the flight and a fitting finale to the trip!



*Marilee*