

Jordan – a treasury of antiquities

By Patricia Arrigoni

Amman, Jordan - I was part of a history making event when I joined the very first cooperative Jordan/Israel tour of both countries. The planning for this venture had begun over a year before in anticipation of the signing of the Peace Accords. Eight American journalists were invited to go on the tour, flying from New York to Amsterdam to Amman on Royal Jordanian airlines and returning on Israel's El Al Airlines from Tel Aviv.

We learned from the Jordanian Secretary General of Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, Dr. Ghassan Mufleh,, that 27,000 people had visited Jordan since the peace had been signed five months before.

Our itinerary began in Amman where we stayed for three nights. From there we visited the ancient Greek/Roman city of Jerash; Umm Qaia, a site offering views of the Jordan Valley, Sea of Galilee and Golan Heights; Madaba, the city of mosaics; Mount Nebo, where Moses is said to have been buried, and other Dead Sea area Biblical locations.

Leaving Amman, we drove south to Petra, a surviving wonder of the ancient world where magnificent buildings are sculpted out of sheer cliffs.

Jordan's capital of Amman, known as Philadelphia in Roman times, makes a good base for side trips to many historical sites. Visitors will also find ancient treasures such as the citadel high above the city – its regal Roman columns, part of Hercules' temple silhouetted against the sky. Nearby are a Roman fountain, the remains of a Byzantine church and a restored Roman theater still in use.

Jerash – Driving north some 30 miles to the remains of the Greek/Roman city of Jerash, we passed rocky hillsides dotted with red poppies and yellow wildflowers.

The first structure we saw upon arrival in Jerash was the magnificent Hadrianic Arch, constructed in 129/130 AD to commemorate the emperor's visit to Jerash. Next to it was the hippodrome, where horses once raced. The city itself was considered to be Late Hellenistic/Early Roman, though some evidence of flint and tools found east of the arch date this civilization back to the Neolithic periods.

During the Roman occupation, Jerash was a center for the flourishing caravan trade. Later, in the Byzantine period, more than 15 churches were built. Then the Persians invaded in 614 A.D. and Islamic rule followed.

What one finds today are reminders of a magnificent civilization that include arched gates, temples, theaters, colonnaded streets, plazas, an ancient cathedral and other churches.

Because the city flourished under the Romans, there were remains of fountains, pools, public baths and underground water systems. We also saw grooves in the streets worn by chariot wheels plus portions of beautiful ancient mosaics.

Umm Qais – This city, along with Jerash, was one of the former cities of the Decapolis, 10 communities of Greco-Roman times that ranged across what is now northern Jordan, Syria and Palestine. Today, the Umm Qais offers splendid views of the Jordan Valley, the Sea of Galilee (Lake Tiberias), the Golan Heights and Yarmuk River Canyon.

We arrived on a beautiful sunny day. Our drive took us north on the King's Highway through farm areas which included plantations of banana trees, date palms and figs plus lemon and orange groves.

I saw one man, wearing a Kufu head dress, hand-plowing a field with a single horse. Lines of laundry hung from windows and across rooftops of the country houses. Here and there were groves of olive trees planted on rocky hillsides. The fruit trees blossomed in glorious colors next to stately Italian cypress trees.

In the distance we could see Mt. Herman in Israel, the highest mountain in the area. As we were traveling on Friday, the Moslem holy day, people were out picnicking along the roads.

As we neared Umm Qais, we became part of a Jordan traffic jam of tour buses, trucks, vans and cars all headed up the mountainside. We lunched outside on a stone patio at the Umm Qais Rest House which offered a spectacular view of the Golan Heights, the Sea of Galilee and the Yarmu River. Lunch was a buffet and just delicious as was all the food in Jordan. I enjoyed a mint salad, spaghetti, rice, human (chick peas), and a dessert called *warbat*.

This was followed by a visit to yet another Roman theater and Byzantine church.

Madaba, Mt. Nebo and the Dead Sea – Madaba, 2,600 feet above sea level, is a land of water (some 118 inches of rainfall annually) and fruit, such as olives and grapes, plus tobacco. Visitors today drive on a 2-lane road planted with pine trees, a branch of the King's Highway, which was the same route used by the ancient caravans.

In 324 A.D. Christianity arrives, and by the sixth century 19 Christian churches had been built. A famous mosaic map of Palestine, originally in a sixth-century Byzantine church, depicts a map of the Holy Land at that time. It is thought to be the most ancient map ever made and consisted of two million pieces of mosaic tiles.

The city of Jerusalem is in the center surrounded by such recognizable places as the Sea of Galilee, the Dead Sea, the Jordan River and several ancient cities. Today, the map is housed in the contemporary Greek Orthodox Church of St. George.

More mosaics are visible in the Monastery of Siyagha on Mt. Nebo. This is the spot from which Moses viewed the "Promised Land" before his death.

It was fascinating to look across at Israel where we could even see Jerusalem high up in the dim distance. There were also views of the West Bank and the River Jordan.

In front of the church, a cross with a snake symbolizes the cross on which Jesus was crucified and the serpent taken up by Moses into the desert.

We continued south from Madaba from the King's Highway to go the Peace Highway on our way to the Dead Sea and a gorgeous sunset swim. We passed Aqaba military camps, two military checkpoints and Bedouin camps of large tents and sheep. I kept seeing houses that were not finished and finally learned that they are constructed with steel rods sticking up so that another story for a son or other family members can be added later. Also, when a roof is put in place taxes start, so many buildings are left unfinished.

We arrived at the Dead Sea Rest House which had bath houses, outdoor showers, children's play equipment and a nice, sandy beach. The water of the Dead Sea was pretty cold but, strangely, warmer under the surface. It was great fun to float with both feet and hands in the air – if I had had a magazine, I really could have floated and read it at the same time.

Petra – The jewel in the crown of Jordan's exquisite antiquities is the world-famous Petra, some 3 ½ hours south of Amman by the Desert Highway. This rose-red city is the legacy of the Nabataeans, an Arab people who settled in South Jordan 2,000 years ago. They carved monumental building facades and tombs into the sandstone cliffs.

Most famous is the Treasury, which moviegoers will recognize from the climactic scene in "Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade." Romans later built limestone roads out of rock hauled all the way from Rome. They also built water pipes, more tombs, baths and a 7,000-seat theater.

We rode into Petra on horseback, then hiked through a narrow desert gorge, a chasm broken apart in a prehistoric earthquake. The cliffs soaring above us at 600 feet contained rock-cut chambers and ancient inscriptions.

When I arrived at the end of the gorge, called a *siq*, I had my first glimpse of the Treasury monument. Sunshine glowed on the ancient carved sandstone make me gasp in awe at the beauty of this astonishing façade.

The best way to see the monuments in Petra is by hiking, but if you get too tired you can hire a horse and buggy or even a camel.

Fortunately there is a restaurant deep in the heart of the ancient city. We enjoyed an excellent buffet lunch which fortified us for the afternoon's hike up the mountainside to explore ancient tombs and for the long hike out.

People were very friendly in Jordan and I found they like people from the United States; many of them have relatives living here. Western dress is fine to wear and the country is very safe.