

Holy Lands Tour – Israel, Palestine & Jordan (February 17, 2016 – March 1, 2016)

Our first major trip this year was an educational adventure beyond our expectations. Let me begin this report with why we chose to visit this area of the world. The “[Holy Land](#)” is where it all started; the lands into which Abraham first walked from Ur, the land which God promised to Abraham and his descendants. The belief in one God started here and this land is where Isaac, Peter & Paul lived. This is the land all armies and nations have for generations aspired to conquer and control, the land where David triumphed over Goliath, and where Solomon built his temple. But above all, Christians need to come here because this is where Jesus was born, ministered, was crucified and resurrected. Only in the Holy Land are you able to walk every day where Jesus walked, to follow in his footsteps, to see and feel the places where the disciples walked, where Jesus performed his miracles and the place where he was nailed to the cross. It is one thing to study the Bible when you are 7,000 miles away, but it is a completely different – some say life-changing – experience doing it while in the Holy Land. You can celebrate Christmas each year, wherever you are, but it’s a totally different experience when you get to see the birthplace of Jesus with your own eyes. It is only in Israel and Jordan that the Bible truly comes to life. There are many destinations across the world to enjoy, but Christian believers have to see, feel, and walk where Jesus lived, taught, died and rose from the dead.



Another reason we visited this area was to combat the “fear-mongering” which the media are constantly blasting us with on TV and in the newspaper. We were completely safe every day and everywhere we went. Education is the key to understanding. We had incredible tour guides who

instilled in us the history and current political environment of these countries; we were able to visit several UNESCO World Heritage sites and, of course, Petra, one of the “Seven Wonders of the World.”

So let’s begin our journey – On Wednesday, February 17th, we flew from El Paso to Houston, then to Newark and finally to Tel Aviv, Israel, where we were transferred by bus to Jerusalem, our first stop. It was already Thursday, February 18th here. Jerusalem is 9 hours ahead of Santa Teresa, NM time so we needed rest to acclimate to the new time zone. We stayed at the Prima Royal Hotel and were briefed about our Israel tour by our guide Adina.



Prima Royal Hotel



Adina – Our Tour Guide



First Glimpse of Jerusalem

After breakfast, our Friday morning tour began at 8:00am, and we started with a visit to the traditional tomb of King David and the Room of the Last Supper. The tomb is situated in a ground floor corner of the remains of the former *Hagia Zion*, a Byzantine church on Mt. Zion. The Last Supper Room is a second-story room in Jerusalem that commemorates the "upper room" in which Jesus shared the Last Supper with the disciples. It is located directly above the Tomb of David and near the Dormition Abbey on Mt. Zion.



King David Statue



Inside King David's Tomb



The Last Supper Room



The walls around Jerusalem National Park at the Dormition abbey on Mt. Zion

Later that morning we toured the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. This church contains the two holiest sites in Christendom: the site where Jesus was crucified, known as "**Calvary**" and **Jesus's empty tomb**, where he is said to have been buried and resurrected. Within the church proper are the last four (or, by some definitions, five) Stations of the Via Dolorosa, representing the final episodes of Jesus' Passion. The church has been a major Christian pilgrimage destination since its creation in the fourth century, as the traditional site of the Resurrection of Christ.



Entrance - Church of the Holy Sepulchre



Inside – One of the Chapels



Location of the cross – Calvary



Entrance to empty tomb of Jesus



Original cave wall (in frame)



Orange-Pomegranate Juice Break



Our juice "break" vendor – Great Drink



Typical street in Jerusalem



We all had some bread during the break

Our next stop was the Western Wall - the holiest of Jewish sites, sacred because it is a remnant of the Herodian retaining wall that once enclosed and supported the Second Temple. It has also been called the "**Wailing Wall**" by European observers because for centuries Jews have gathered here to lament the loss of their temple. The Western Wall was built by King Herod in **20 BC** during his expansion of the Temple enclosure, and is part of a retaining wall that enclosed the western part of Temple Mount. According to the Roman-Jewish historian Josephus, construction of these walls took 11 years, during which time it rained in Jerusalem only at night so as not to interfere with the workers' progress.

In **70 AD**, the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and its Temple. During the Ottoman Period (beginning in the 16th century), the wall became the Jews' chief place of pilgrimage, where they came to lament the destruction of the Temple. For centuries, the Western Wall was located in a narrow alley just 12 feet wide that could accommodate only a few hundred densely packed worshipers. But in **1967**, immediately after the Six Day War, Israelis leveled the neighboring Arab district to create the **Western Wall Plaza**, which can accommodate tens of thousands of pilgrims. At the same time, the Israelis made the wall about 6 1/2 feet higher by digging down and exposing two more tiers of ashlar (squared stones) from the Temple Plaza's retaining wall that had been buried by accumulated debris for centuries.



In the afternoon we crossed the border to Palestine and the West Bank to visit the town of Bethlehem and the Church of the Nativity - the birth place of Christ.



Maps of Israel, Palestine (West Bank) & Bethlehem

Church of the Nativity



The birth place of Christ



Donna touching the sacred area



The manger area where Jesus was visited

The following day (Saturday – Feb. 20) we went on an all day trip to Masada, followed by a swim (float) in the Dead Sea. Masada is a UNESCO World Heritage Site; an ancient fortress occupying a strategic location high on a flat plateau above the Dead Sea. It is one of the greatest archaeological sites in Israel and, perhaps, across the world. Masada is an ancient fortification in the Southern District of Israel situated on top of an isolated mesa on the eastern edge of the Judean Desert, overlooking the Dead Sea 12 miles east of Arad. Herod the Great built palaces for himself on the mountain and fortified Masada between 37 and 31 BCE. According to Josephus, the Siege of Masada by troops of the Roman Empire towards the end of the First Jewish–Roman War ended in the mass suicide of 960 people – the Sicarii rebels and their families hiding there.



Ascending Masada by cable car



Topographic model of Masada



View from the top of Masada



Walking around the site



Inside one of the bath houses



Getting the historical perspective



Aerial view of Masada (Wikipedia)



Various other photos from Masada taken during our tour

We continued the adventure by traveling to the lowest point on Earth – the Dead Sea for an

“unsinkable” swim in the salty water. The Dead Sea is a salt lake bordered by Jordan to the east and Israel and the West Bank to the west. We were swimming on the Israel side today. Its surface and shores are 1,407 feet below sea level, Earth's lowest elevation on land. The Dead Sea is 997 feet deep, the deepest hypersaline lake in the world. With 34.2% salinity, it is also one of the world's saltiest bodies of water. It was fun to “float” around effortlessly.



This was a very busy day for us. In the evening we attended a spectacular “Sound & Light” show at the Tower of David. It told the story of Jerusalem in original music and virtual reality images. We were not permitted to take pictures during the show, so those below show the entrance; the stage and area around it, prior to the show.



Entrance to the Tower of David Museum



Inside the Tower complex

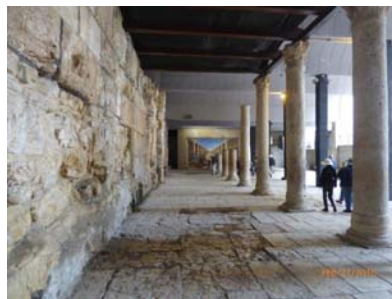


The seating area & stage

On Sunday, Feb. 21 we were taken on an extended tour of Jerusalem, both the old city and the new city areas. The day began with a visit to the Jewish Quarters Four Sephardic Synagogues, then through the Cardo area – an old Roman shopping street during the Byzantine period, and into the Jerusalem Archaeological Park in the center of town. This park encloses the Temple Mount area and the famous Dome of the Rock. There was so much to see and learn, and this was just the morning tour.



Four Sephardic Synagogue



Cardo – old Roman shopping street



Western Wall & Dome of the Rock

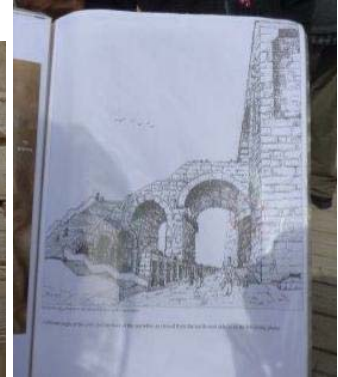
The Temple Mount is the holiest site in Judaism, which regards it as the place where God's divine presence is manifested more than any other place. It is one of the most important religious sites in the Old City of Jerusalem and has been used as a religious site for thousands of years. At least four religions are known to have made use of the Temple Mount: Judaism, Greco-Roman paganism, Christianity, and Islam. The present site is dominated by three monumental structures: the al-Aqsa Mosque, the Dome of the Rock and the Dome of the Chain. Herodian walls and gates with additions dating back to the late Byzantine and early Islamic periods cut through the flanks of the Mount. Currently it can be accessed via eleven gates, ten reserved for Muslims and one for non-Muslims. With guard posts of Israeli police in the vicinity of each, it is one of the most contested religious sites on Earth.



Aerial view of the Temple Mount (Wikipedia)



Robinson's Arch, situated on the southwestern flank, once supported a staircase that led to the Temple Mount. (Note: Picture of staircase on the right)



Southern wall of the Temple Mount – Southwest Corner (Wikipedia)



Walled entrance to Temple Mount



Panorama of the Temple Mount, including Al-Aqsa Mosque and Dome of the Rock, from the Mount of Olives (Wikipedia)

The Dome of the Rock is located at the site of the original Jewish Temple of Solomon and is said to have housed the “Ark of the Covenant” - a wooden chest clad with gold containing the two stone tablets of the Ten Commandments; as well as Aaron's rod which was endowed with miraculous power during the Plagues of Egypt that preceded the Exodus.

Our afternoon tour began with a visit to the Israel Museum which is the home of the Shrine of the Book containing the Dead Sea Scrolls – the oldest biblical manuscripts in the world. The museum also has a scale model of the Second Temple of Jerusalem.



Shrine of the Book at the Israel Museum

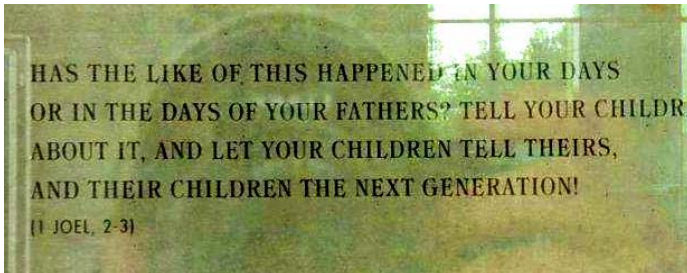


Sample of the Dead Sea Scrolls (Wikipedia)



Scale model of the Second Temple of Jerusalem, including Temple Mount

From there we visited the Yad Vashem Memorial to the Holocaust located on the Mount of Remembrance. This is Israel's official memorial to the six million victims of the Holocaust that occurred during World War II. Next to the Western Wall, this is the second most visited site in all of Israel. The displays in this museum bring the Holocaust to life and helps you understand the unimaginable horror these people experienced.



Inscription as you enter the museum



The Hall of Names containing Pages of Testimony commemorating the millions of Jews who were murdered during the Holocaust (Wikipedia)

That evening the group of us had dinner at the Olives & Fish Restaurant which is a Kosher restaurant specializing in Mediterranean and international cuisine. Most restaurant food in Israel is served family style with the food placed on the table in serving dishes from which those eating may help themselves.

On Monday, Feb. 22 we said goodbye to Jerusalem and headed north toward Tiberias, a tourist town on the Sea of Galilee. We made several stops along the way, the first was Beit She'an, an extraordinary Roman ruins, and the best place in Israel to get a sense of what it was like to live, work and shop in the Roman Empire. (It rained for a little that day.)



Scale Model of Beit She'an National Park



Overview of the park - taken from the entrance



Our tour guide gave us an opportunity to look for some archeological treasures as we walked around the site. Donna found a piece that looked like a handle to an old pottery pot. We had a brief lunch at the site following the tour.



Heading for lunch with our new friends Eddie & Rita from California

After lunch we were taken to Capernaum, a town frequently mentioned in the Bible as Jesus' base during his Galilean ministry. The town is cited in all four gospels where it was reported to have been near the hometown of the apostles Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John, as well as the tax collector Matthew. Within the town were the ruins of the "White Synagogue" which was built upon the remains of the Synagogue of Jesus.



Excavated "White Synagogue"



Remains of the old city of Capernaum



Statue of Peter

From here we went to the baptismal site, Yardenit, on the river Jordan, one of the world's most sacred rivers. This site is just east of the city of Jericho. Two people in our tour group decided to get baptized at this site.



Overview of the baptismal site



Bobby & Cynthia during baptism



Donna filling a bottle with "holy water"



Donna & Carey at the baptismal site



Entrance to our hotel that night



View from our hotel room

On Tuesday morning, Feb. 23rd we went on a full day tour of Galilee and the Golan Heights, which borders the country of Syria. Our journey began in Safed, one of Judaism's holiest cities. Legend has it that Safed was founded by a son of Noah after the Great Flood. We visited the Ashkenazi Ari Synagogue, walked through an artist shopping area and the Safed Candle Gallery.



Ashkenazi Ari
← Synagogue

Noah's Ark
Candle at the
Safed Candle
Gallery →



Later that morning we were treated to a tour of a kibbutz (a collective community in Israel that is based on agriculture.) Kibbutzim began as utopian communities, a combination of socialism and Zionism. In recent decades, some kibbutzim have been privatized and changes have been made in the communal lifestyle. A member of a kibbutz is called a *kibbutznik*, and one of them was our tour guide for this event. They served us an excellent lunch after which we were on our way to Har Ben Tal nature preserve, the site of a former Israel bunker and overlooking the country of Syria.



Lunch at the kibbutz



Israeli bunker at Har Ben Tal



Statues of Israeli guards behind sign



Israel/Syria border fence at top of mountain, overlooking the country of Syria



United Nations Peacekeeper at work

On the way back to our hotel we stopped at a winery in Katzrin for a taste of their special vintages. We also made a quick stopped at a nearby olive oil factory.



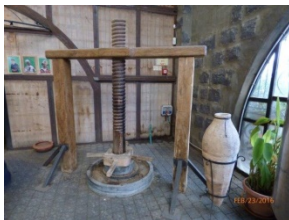
Golan Heights Winery



The guy in charge of the wine tasting



The wine tasters - our group



Original Olive Oil Press



Another old press



Special olive oil hand lotion



Customer shop

Next stop - Jordan

On Wednesday, Feb. 24 we said goodbye to Adina our tour guide, left Israel, and were escorted into Jordan at the Sheik Hussein border crossing, where we met our Jordanian guide – Hazim. Each person in our group was required to pay 108 Israeli shekels (\$27.50) before leaving the country. Going into Jordan requires a visa and normally a fee, however our guide was able to get the fee waived for all of us – an excellent start for our tour in Jordan. Lunch was nothing more than a few snacks on the bus. We were headed to Amman (Jordan’s capital city) and often referred to as the “white city” because all the houses, in fact all the buildings, are built using white stone. Amman is one of the oldest, continually inhabited cities on Earth. We began our tour at the Citadel, an historical site, at the top of a mountain, in the center of town. It has a long history of occupation by many great civilizations. Most of the buildings still visible at the site are from the Roman, Byzantine, and Umayyad periods. The major buildings at the site are the Temple of Hercules, a Byzantine church, and the Umayyad Palace.



Crossing the border into Jordan



Amman – the “White City”



Touring the Citadel

The ancient Roman Amphitheater can be seen from the Citadel. Its also fun to climb the steps (seats) of it and observe the people below.



View of the Amphitheater from Citadel



Amphitheater from the top seat



Donna interacting with the locals

On the way from the Citadel to the Amphitheater we walked through the souks (shopping area and farm market). It was fun to experience the daily routine of the city and observe the merchants/peddlers in their natural habitat. There were many varieties of fruits & vegetables, as well as hundreds of other trinkets and souvenirs that you could buy. The sights and sounds of the people and the shops were enlightening. It was fun to experience the real culture of the city.



We stayed at the Marriot Amman hotel for two nights. Of the 42 people on our tour of Israel, only 24 of them continued the tour into Jordan, however we picked up 17 new people who began their tour in Jordan. This evening we had a welcome orientation with the Tour Manager and our other traveling companions.



After breakfast on Thursday, Feb. 25th we traveled north of Amman to Jerash, the best preserved example of Roman civilization in Jordan. It is sometimes misleadingly referred to as the "Pompeii of the Middle East", referring to its size, extent of excavation and level of preservation (though Jerash was never buried by a volcano). The city features theaters, churches, temples of Zeus and Artemis, a Nymphaeum and colonnade street. This is the second most visited site in all of Jordan – second only to Petra, which we visit later in the week.





A Jordanian bagpipe player & drummer played some songs for us in the theater

Our next stop was the Ajloun 12th century Muslim Castle built during a campaign against the Crusaders. The castle stands on the ruins of a monastery, traces of which were discovered during archaeological excavations. The original castle had four corner towers connected by curtain walls and a double gate. Arrow slits were incorporated in the thick walls and it was surrounded by a dry moat averaging about 52 feet in width and about 40–50 feet deep. We were taken by a tarp-covered pick-up truck from the foot of the mountain to the castle at the top. Once we were there we were able to explore all the hidden chambers and big rooms. Why anyone would choose to live here is beyond me. It was dark and dingy, but it was probably a mansion back in the day.



View of the castle from the road



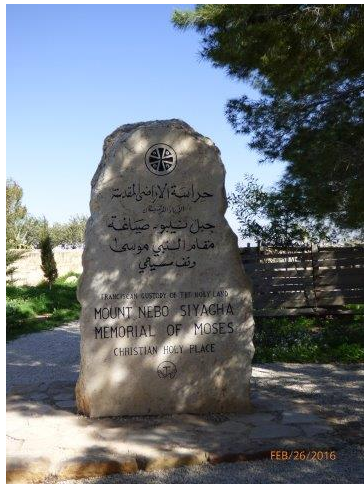
Our taxi to the top



Entrance to the castle



Today (Friday, Feb. 26) we drove along the Kings Way towards Petra. Along the way we stopped at Mt. Nebo, the reputed burial site of Moses. It overlooks the Jordan River valley and the Dead Sea.



The view Moses saw as he looked at the Promised Land.
 ← God would not let him enter, so he never came down from this mountain.

Next stop was at Kerak Castle, another large Crusader era castle. Interesting to see how high it was – the perfect fortress, almost impossible to conquer.

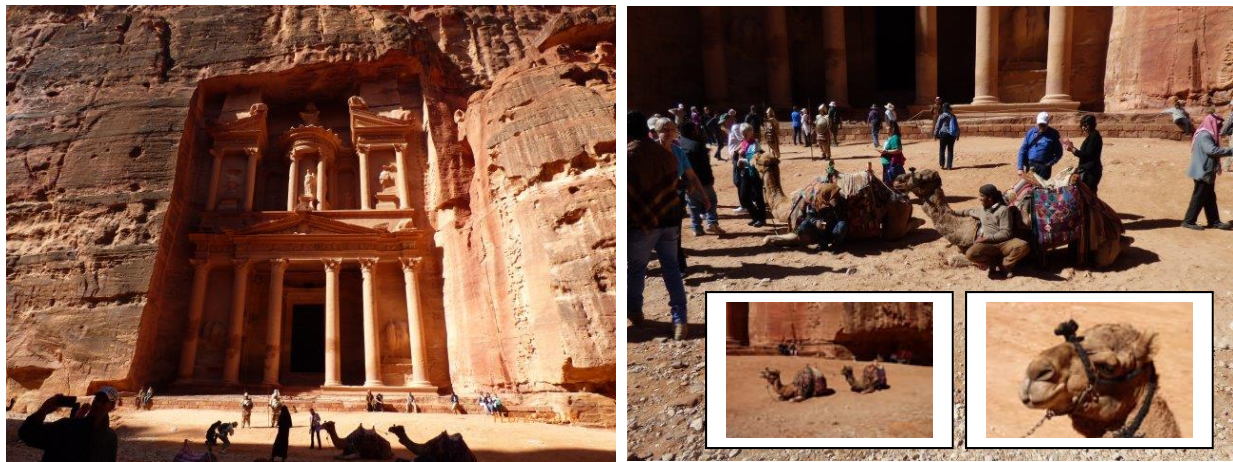


Saturday, February 27 was our day at Petra. What can I say about Petra? – It was recently voted one of the new *Seven Wonders of the World*, because of its various monuments, shrines and temples. If you've never heard of it, let me tell you about it. This remote dead city is one of the greatest archaeological treasures on Earth. It's an open air museum that never ceases to amaze everyone who has the opportunity to explore it. The people who created it were called Nabataeans. Historians believe they were travellers from the Arabian Peninsula. They were educated people who spoke a language similar to Aramaic. They lived in Petra during the 6th century BC and were known for their skills in water management. Petra was on the caravan route running from Yemen to the ports of the Mediterranean Sea, from east to west caravans laden with frankincense, gold, silk and many other things would pass through Petra and rest there. This made the Nabataeans very wealthy. As a result they built temples honoring their Gods and Kings. Much of Petra's appeal comes from its awesome, multi-colored sandstone. The main entrance to the city is through a long, deep, narrow gorge of stunning natural beauty, called the Siq. At the end of the Siq, just when you think you've seen enough dazzling sights, you come

across the Treasury building. Its incredible, so much so that no amount of descriptive prose, or pictures do it justice. You have to see it to believe it. This elaborately carved façade represents the Nabataean’s engineering genius. It was made famous in the film “Indiana Jones & the Last Crusade.” The façade is 98 feet wide and 141 feet high, all carved into the sandstone rock.



Walking into the Siq Continuing through the Siq First glimpse of the Treasury Standing in front of the Treasury



The Treasury is only one of hundreds of buildings, tombs and temples at this site. We spent most of the day exploring. See map of Petra below. The Siq is #6, the Treasury #7.



We walked from #1 to #23 and back; walking along the Colonnaded Street (#19), visiting various tombs (#11,12,13) and climbing 600 steps to the “High Place of Sacrifice” (#31). Overall we probably walked 7-8 miles that day.

Here are some of the pictures we took.



Donna with our Tourist Policeman



Evidence of Water Lines within rock



Carriage rides were available in the Siq



Donkey rides were available to all



Typical temple carvings along the route



View from the street, entering the city



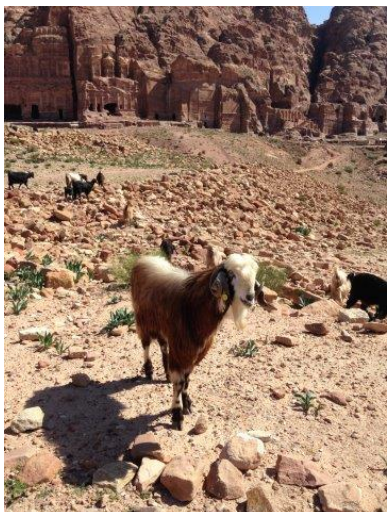
Colorful sandstone rock – cave homes



Scenic view of cave homes



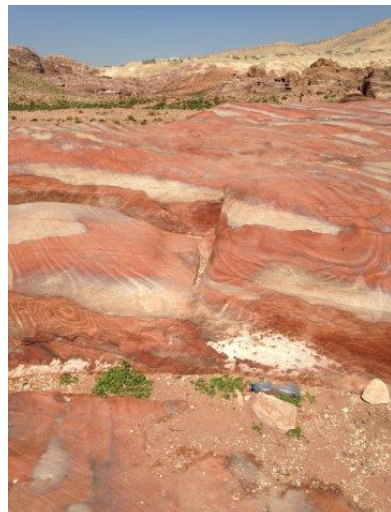
Urn Tomb from the main street



Goats along the path



Donna's favorite goat



Colorful sandstone formation

Petra (continued)



Donna & Carey – Urn Tomb in background -



Close up of Urn Tomb -



Urn Tomb from bottom - near road



Start of the 600 step hike to “High Place”



Typical Bedouin home along the way -



Inside the home



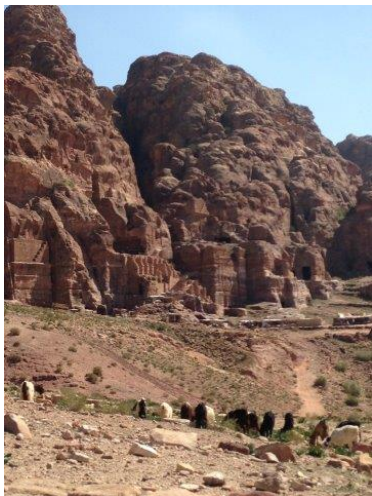
Hiking to the “High Place of Sacrifice”



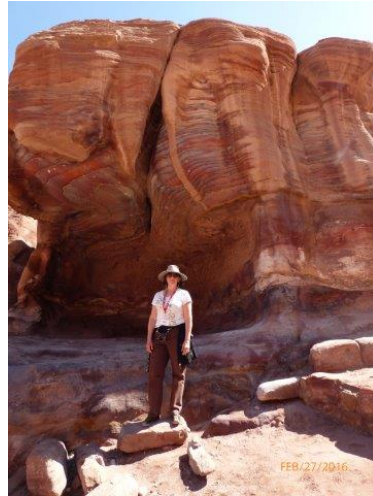
Looking down from the top



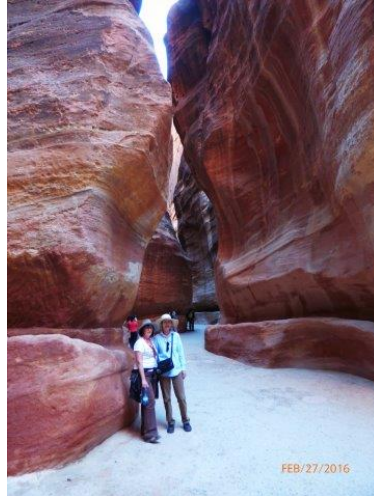
Another view from the top



Overview of the tomb area



Scenic view of the rock formation



Heading back out of the Siq

Petra is both a Jordanian national treasure and a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It is a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

What do you do after you've just spent a day at one of the Seven Wonders of the World? Well – you go visit Wadi Rum, a surreal desert terrain of ancient river beds. Scenes from the current movie “The Martian” were filmed here, as well as the movie epic “Lawrence of Arabia.” Wadi Rum means ‘valley of the high desert.’ This is another UNESCO World Heritage site. Our journey began in 4x4 vehicles and was enhanced by a one mile camel ride. We were served lunch in an authentic Bedowin tent in the middle of the desert where we were introduced to “Zarb” – a selection of foods cooked in an oven with hot coals beneath the desert floor.



Through the desert on a 4x4



Back of the 4x4 – Donna & Eddie



Carey, Betsy & Rita hanging on



Getting ready for the ride



“Donna of Arabia” – Lets Go (Yellar)



On the road – Cool place!



The “Zarb” – Getting ready for the feast



Here it comes!!



They serve a lot of chicken in Jordan

After this we headed to our hotel in Amman, near the Dead Sea. We stayed at a luxury Marriot Resort. Later that evening we had our Farewell Dinner at the resort where the group had the opportunity to wish Donna a Happy Birthday – It was Sunday, February 28 and our tour guide (Hazim) decided to treat Donna with a special desert. See next page.



The Birthday Girl



Jordan Valley Marriot Resort & Spa

Monday (Feb. 29), our last day in Jordan, we decided to visit Bethany where John the Baptist baptized Jesus. The authenticity of this site comes from the testimonies in the gospels. In addition, the archeological sites discovered show remains of five churches built in the fifth century as memorials of Jesus' baptism.



Sign showing the way to the site



Site where Jesus was baptized



Carey & Donna at the site

Within a mile was a section of the Jordan River that clearly showed the boundary between Israel and Jordan. We were on the Jordan side of the river.



Donna & Carey at the Jordan River

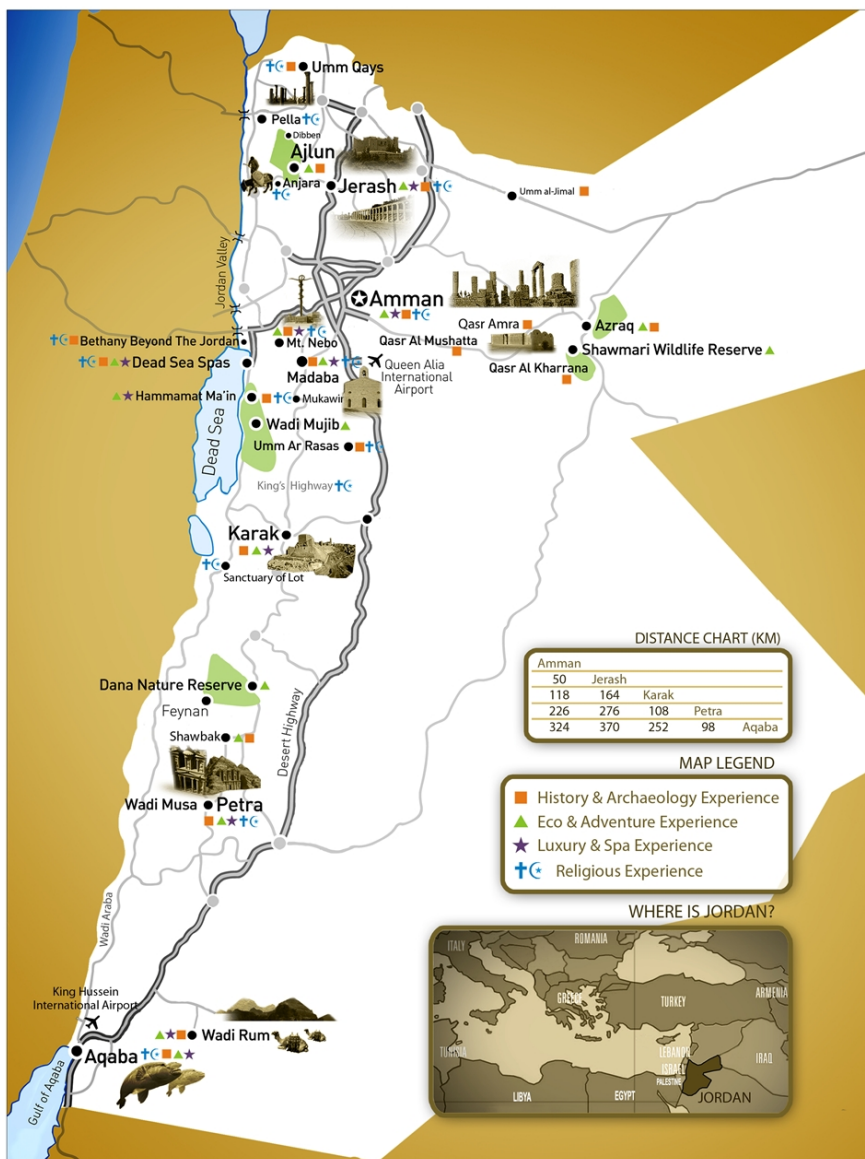


There are two floating ropes & bobbars. The first is the boundary for the country of Jordan, in between, the "international waters," then Israel.

We had the afternoon free to swim at the resort or float in the Dead Sea. We did both.



Here is a map of the places we visited in Jordan. Our tour ended today and we packed our bags to head home.



When people ask – **How was your trip?** We respond by saying that we had an incredible journey, one that we are very glad we took. We must admit there was a bit of hesitation early, on our part, perpetrated by the media who delight in portraying only the “bad” to build fear with the hope of generating higher ratings. The reality in this part of the world is totally different. We felt 100% safe everywhere we went, had no inkling of turmoil, and we would highly recommend you make time, once in your lifetime, to experience the history and culture of this area. You won’t regret it.

Until Next Time
Best Wishes

Carey & Donna
March 7, 2016