

# Our First Trip to Israel (and Jordan)

By Larry Martin

## Part 4 – Leaving Israel, Entering Jordan, Overnight in Amman, and on our Way to Petra

[Note: Part 4 continues an account of the trip my wife Ruth and I took to Israel and Jordan, October 14-28, 2017. Pictures from the internet have a red border; all the others were taken with my iPhone. All parts of the travelogue are posted on the internet, at [www.lakesidepress.com/IsraelTrip.html](http://www.lakesidepress.com/IsraelTrip.html).]

### October 20

Before crossing the border to enter Jordan, we toured one more ruin in Israel, Bet Shean (alternately spelled Beit Shean and Beit She'an). This site turned out to be most interesting, but not so much for the usual ancient walls, roads, columns, etc. – to the untrained eye the physical ruins all look the same. It was most interesting for the history of the site, as one of the Decapolis.

What is the **Decapolis**? Congratulations, if you know. I didn't, nor it's probably safe to say, did anyone else on the tour before we visited Bet Shean. Here is the Wikipedia definition.

The **Decapolis** (Greek, Ten Cities) was a group of ten cities on the eastern frontier of the Roman Empire in the southeastern Levant. The cities were grouped together because of their language, culture, location, and political status, with each functioning as an autonomous city-state.



### The Roman Decapolis:

1. Gerasa (Jerash) in Jordan
2. Scythopolis (Bet-Shean) in Israel, the only city west of the Jordan River
3. Hippos (Hippus or Sussita) in Israel (Golan Heights)
4. Gadara (Umm Qais) in Jordan
5. Pella (West of Irbid) in Jordan
6. Philadelphia, modern day Amman, the capital of Jordan
7. Capitolias, also Dion, today Beit Ras in Jordan
8. Canatha (Qanawat) in Syria
9. Raphana in Jordan
10. Damascus, the capital of modern Syria

Bet Shean was a settlement long before the Romans arrived, with prior civilizations of Egyptians, Philistines, Greeks and others. The Romans enlarged the city and added it to their collection. Seeing these ruins far from Rome gives you an appreciation of how extensive and developed the Roman Empire was.

On October 20 we visited two of the Decapolis cities, Bet Shean in Israel and Jerash in Jordan; the next day we toured Philadelphia, the precursor to Jordan's capital, Amman. Unlike Masada and Petra, which are two truly unique sites you'll never forget, the Decapolis ruins seem hard to distinguish one from another after a brief visit. Since we visited three of them, it will be helpful to present some brief background information. Note the biblical references.

The Roman government wanted Roman culture to flourish in the farthest reaches of the empire, which at the time included eastern Palestine. So they encouraged the growth of these ten cities, allowing them some political autonomy within the protective sphere of Rome. Each city functioned as a polis or city-state, with jurisdiction over an area of the surrounding countryside. Each city also minted its own coins. Many coins from Decapolis cities identify their city as "autonomous," "free," "sovereign," or "sacred," terms that imply some sort of self-governing status.

The Romans strongly left their cultural stamp on all of the cities. Each one was eventually rebuilt with a Roman-style grid of streets based around a central *cardo* and/or *decumanus*. The Romans sponsored and built numerous temples and other public buildings. The imperial cult, the worship of the Roman emperor, was a very common practice throughout the Decapolis and was one of the features that linked the different cities. A small open-air temple or *façade*, called a *Kalybe*, was unique to the region.

The cities may also have enjoyed strong commercial ties, fostered by a network of new Roman roads. This has led to their common identification today as a "federation" or "league". The Decapolis was probably never an official political or economic union; most likely it signified the collection of city-states which enjoyed special autonomy during early Roman rule.

The New Testament gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke mention that the Decapolis region was a location of the ministry of Jesus. According to Matthew 4:23-25 the Decapolis was one of the areas from which Jesus drew his multitude of disciples, attracted by his "healing all kinds of sickness". The Decapolis was one of the few regions where Jesus travelled in which Gentiles (people who are not Jewish) were in the majority: most of Jesus' ministry focused on teaching to Jews. Mark 5:1-10 emphasizes the Decapolis' gentile character when Jesus encounters a herd of pigs, an animal forbidden by *Kashrut*, the Jewish dietary laws. A demon-possessed man healed by Jesus in this passage asked to be included among the disciples who traveled with Jesus but he was refused and instructed to remain in the Decapolis region.

...Jerash (*Gerasa*) and Bet She'an (*Scythopolis*) survive as towns today. Damascus has never lost its prominent role throughout later history. Philadelphia was long abandoned, but was revived in the 19th century and has become the capital city of Jordan, Amman. Twentieth-century archaeology has identified most of the other cities, and most have undergone or are undergoing considerable excavation.

As the last paragraph states, Jerash (in Jordan) and Bet Shean (in Israel) are towns today, each adjacent to its namesake ruins. We were pleasantly surprised when, passing through the center of modern Bet Shean, we saw a sign announcing “Cleveland-Beit Shean,” as sister cities. The motor coach did not stop, and only my wife and I, who lived in Cleveland for 38 years, could have cared about the sign and its meaning. We knew that contributions to Cleveland’s Jewish Welfare fund go, in part, to help Israel and also this remote urban outpost.

The picture below, from the internet, is a different sign than the one we saw on the highway; Valley of Springs is the region around Beit Shean



The town of Beit Shean surrounds the ruins of ancient Beit Shean, as seen in the map below. We only toured the ancient site, now formally Beit She'an National Park, seen in the photos.



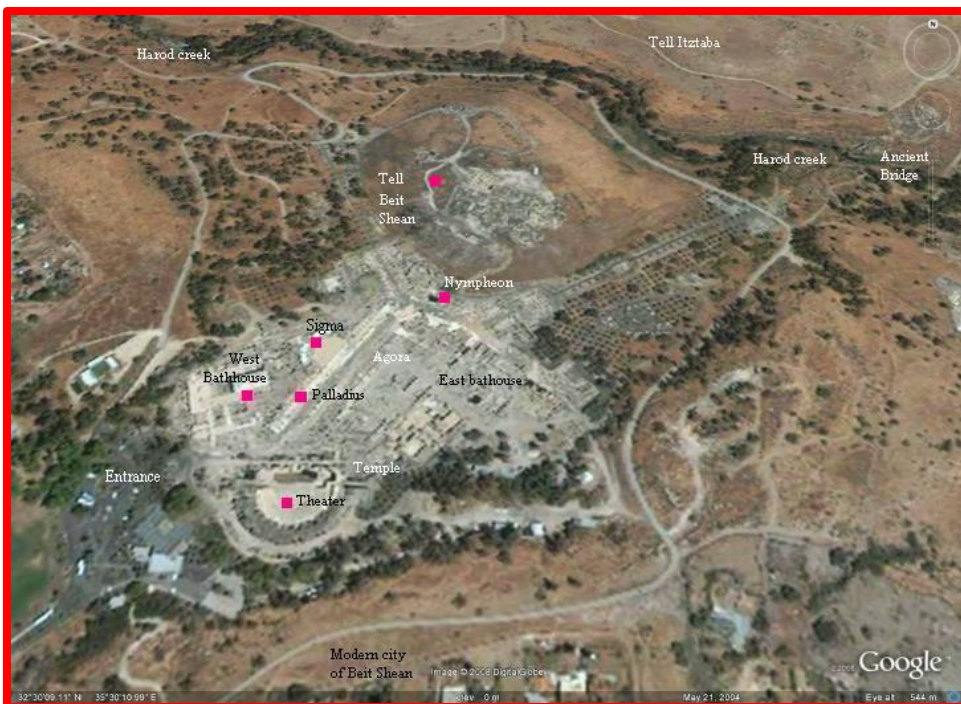
Top left: Sign indicating entrance to Israel's Bet She'an National Park. Top right: model of Bet Shean at its most developed point. Center: overview of ruins just after you enter the park; the hill in the distance is a tel, site of further archeological digging. Also note the colonnaded street, a development of the Roman era (see next page). Bottom two photos show destruction from a major earthquake in 749 A.D. that destroyed several cities in the region, including Bet Shean and Jerash. Bet Shean was rebuilt, but not to the extent seen in the model; Jerash was never rebuilt. Archeologists found the fallen columns as you see them here.



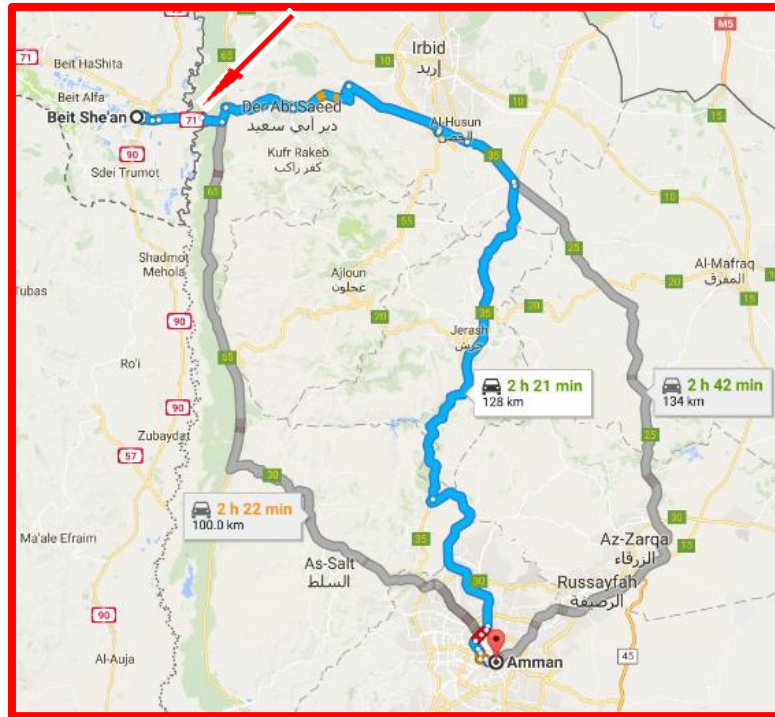
Of all the ruins we visited, only Bet Shean displayed information about ancient bathrooms.



The main street of Bet Shean, during Roman times, was the colonnaded Palladius, shown in this Google aerial view. The street runs about 150 meters from the south (near the theater) to the "tell" (also spelled 'tel') in the distance. On right, some of our group walking along the street, and below that, an artist's drawing of what the street looked like in the 1st century A.D. On both sides of the paved street was a raised roofed sidewalk, with shops and public houses.



From Bet Shean we took Highway 71 to cross into Jordan. The arrow shows the crossing point, one of the three between the two countries. The black squiggly line is the Jordan River.



### **CROSSING INTO JORDAN**

Entering Jordan was easy and not easy. Easy, because our Israeli guide Jonathan has done it with tour groups many times; just follow the designated steps and eventually you enter the country. Not easy, because it involves going through two checkpoints, a change of busses and drivers, with transfer of all luggage, and then waiting to present your passport and get a visa. As required by Jordan, it also meant a change of guides.

As we approached the border, Jonathan said “No pictures. The Israeli border doesn’t want you taking any pictures,” so I put away my smart phone. We stayed on the bus as he told the Israeli guards (in Hebrew) who we were and where we were going – fairly routine. Sometimes, he said, they ask for passports, but not this time; they passed our bus through and we drove over the Jordan River to the parking area for Jordan’s checkpoint. Several tour busses were ahead of us, so there were dozens of tourists milling around.



As soon as our bus parked, a large Jordanian man named Daoud (David in Islam) got on board and introduced himself (shown in photo); he was to be our guide for the next five days. Jonathan would stay with us, but in Jordan he was no longer our official guide. Like Jonathan, Daoud is very personable and highly knowledgeable about his country. He has been guiding tours for many years.

We gave Daoud our passports, and then went into a waiting area until our turn came up. After a half hour, and after return of our passports (presumably all checked by the Jordanians), we got in line. We individually presented our passport to border personnel behind a counter, received a visa, and then were able to board the new bus. The whole process, from arrival to reboarding, took about an hour. One additional person joined us: a young Jordanian police officer who carried a holstered gun. This is fairly routine, we learned, for foreign tour groups. He stayed with us the whole time in Jordan.

Our first stop inside Jordan was Jaresh, one of the Decapolis cities. Below is an aerial view of ancient Jaresh, with the modern city in the background.



Above left, gate to ancient city of Jaresh. Above right, Ruth in the ancient city, with modern Jaresh in the distance.



Inside one of the Jaresh's amphitheaters, a trio of native Jordanians treated us to a recital, playing drums and bagpipes. Though very touristy, it was (surprisingly) entertaining, especially when they called Ruth down from the seats to join them. I took a short video, posted on YouTube. <https://youtu.be/Y4lustojr6A>



After the visit to the ruins we had lunch in the town of Jaresh, and then made our way to Amman. I haven't written much about food, but it was always plentiful and delicious. We never had to order off a menu: as soon as we sat down the food, family style, was delivered to the table. Dishes of meat and rice for carnivores, and an amazing variety of vegetable dishes for vegetarians. (After days of this fare some of us pined for good old-fashioned pizza, a craving that wasn't satisfied until we got to Tel Aviv.)

In the restaurant we noticed a group of young women smoking hookahs; this is apparently common in Jordan, and perhaps in other Middle Eastern countries as well. I've covered their faces since they were not part of our group, but copied a photo from the internet (right) to show the whole apparatus.



<http://www.mcccvoice.org/shisha/>





After lunch we made a couple of other stops, which I won't bore you with, and got to Amman about an hour before sunset. Before going to the hotel we stopped at the Citadel, ancient ruins include the Decapolis city of Philadelphia (see Page 1). You didn't know there was an ancient Philadelphia in the Holy Land? Neither did I. Yes, more ruins, but the site also afforded good views of part of modern day Amman (far right). The middle photo shows an aerial view of the Citadel.

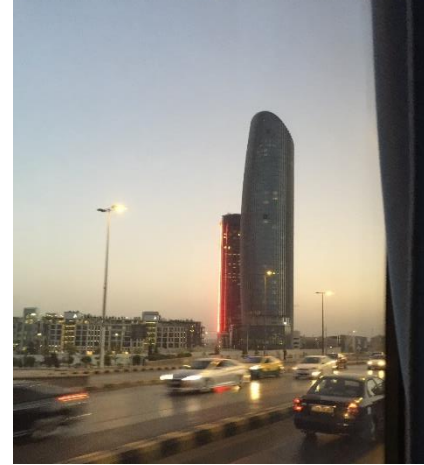


I won't even attempt to summarize the history shown in these two stone tablets, which are displayed prominently at the Citadel. Almost everywhere you go in the Holy Land, the history is centuries-long and comprised of layered civilizations. In a hyphenated word, the history that confronts the tourist is mind-boggling. For example, the entire archeological history of the Citadel goes back to 1650 B.C., and includes the following civilizations: Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks (who named it Philadelphia), Romans and Muslims. It has been known as Amman since 661 A.D.



We spent an hour at the Citadel; on leaving, at sunset, we passed some of Amman's modern day skyscrapers, shown here. We then checked into Amman's Kempinski Hotel, the nicest hotel of the trip, and the only one-night stay (others were 2-3 nights).

Amman is Jordan's capital and its economic, political and cultural center. It has a population of about 4 million, and is considered one of the most westernized Arab cities. Amman is much cheaper than Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, which (I think) is why we stayed in a 5-star hotel here, but lower ranked hotels in hotels in Israel.



### October 21

The next morning, after a breakfast buffet plentiful enough to feed an army, we checked out of the hotel, boarded the bus and made a single stop in Amman proper: the King Abdullah mosque. Completed in 1989, it is the largest mosque in Jordan; its main sanctuary will hold up to 7000 worshippers. This is also the only mosque in Amman that openly welcomes non-Muslim visitors. The two views here are from the internet; the other photos I took.



The main sanctuary is shown below here. To enter, women have to wear *abayas* (full-length dress, black or brown), provided by the mosque. Men can enter in street clothes (though no shoes).



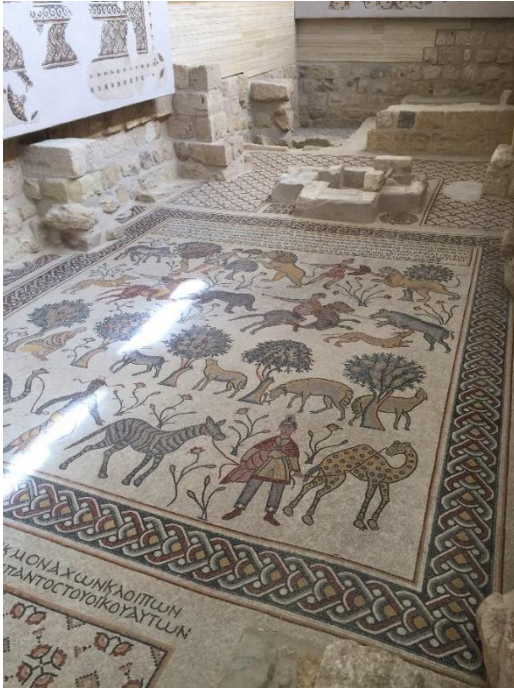
Inside, Daoud (in yellow shirt) demonstrated the proper prayer position, adopted by the most faithful five times a day. Before leaving, we all posed for yet another group picture. Note that some of the abayas are brown and some black.



Leaving Amman, we drove to Mount Nebo, mentioned in the Old Testament as the place where Moses was granted a view of the Promised Land, and where some think he died. The view from the summit does provide a great panorama of the Holy Land. It is said that on a clear day you can see Jerusalem (we did not).



Remains of a 4<sup>th</sup> century Byzantine church, built to commemorate Moses' death, were discovered on Mount Nebo in 1933. Now there is a modern church on the site, shown above, which contains some of the ancient Byzantine mosaics (below).



There is more than one legend about Moses and Mount Nebo. According to the final chapter of the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses ascended Mount Nebo to view the Land of Israel, which God had said he would not enter. One legend has it that he died in an unknown valley location in Moab [a region south of Mount Nebo], another that he was buried somewhere on Mount Nebo. Scholars continue to dispute whether the mountain currently known as Nebo is the same as the mountain referred to in Deuteronomy – another example of historical uncertainty. Just about everything that actually took place in these Biblical sites seems to be in dispute, if you dig deep enough (pun intended).

Speaking of mosaics...the Byzantine mosaics are truly magnificent, and provided a segue to our next stop – a mosaic shop! Road Scholar commonly stops at places that sell locally-made crafts. This is a large shop and they were waiting for us. On the way in we had a brief mosaic-making demonstration. The process looks both tedious and artful. We were impressed. Then we went inside and the prices impressed us even more (high).





Above left is a small reproduction, in mosaic tiles, of the Mount Nebo Byzantine original. The other two pictures are inside the shop. The round mosaic tables were about \$1500 - \$2500, with free shipping to the states. Of course everything was negotiable. Ruth ended up buying two pillow cases, and some small trinkets for gifts. Wherever you travel to a touristy area, you will find shops like this one. “Who buys this stuff?” I always ask. Then I realize – we do. Tourists do. That’s how they stay in business.



After leaving the shop we had a 3-hour drive to Petra, the ancient ruins of the Nabataeans, and the one site in Jordan that most American tourists who visit Israel make a point of visiting. The town adjacent to Petra (Wadi Musa) has many hotels, and we spent two nights in one located right at the entrance to the site.

Many visitors to Petra come from cruise ships, but that requires a two-hour bus ride from either of two Red Sea ports, Israel’s Eilat or Jordan’s Aqaba. This bus trip puts cruise-ship tourists at a disadvantage, since they must spend 4 hours on a bus, with much less time to see tour Petra, which is huge. Our two nights in a hotel gave us a full day to tour the site, and we took full advantage of the opportunity.

## First Impressions of Jordan

- Jordan is very welcoming to tourists. Jordanians really do want you to visit. However, the upheavals in the Middle East, most recently in Syria (from which many refugees have entered Jordan over the northern border) has created the impression among many that the country is not safe. Our guide often reminded us that his country *is* safe, and that we should tell everyone this when we return home. Our group certainly felt safe wherever we went. The policeman who accompanied our tour bus seemed unnecessary.
- Bathrooms are plentiful but you are expected to tip the attendant, a dollar per one or two people. Before the trip, Road Scholar told us to bring about 20 single dollars for this purpose. If you go at every bus stop and tour site (which most of our group did), 20 singles is not enough for a five-day visit. Of course tipping is optional, but we felt obligated. It’s the price you pay to have a clean bathroom when you visit ruins or stop someplace on the highway. There was no need to tip in Israel, as there were no hovering bathroom attendants.

- Much of the highway from the Jordan River to Amman was strewn with trash (see photo, taken while bus was moving); this was a marked change from traveling in Israel. Initially we thought it would be just one area, perhaps near a landfill. But then we noticed an amazing amount of roadside trash all the way to Amman, and for many miles south of the capital as well. It was certainly far more trash than you'd expect from random drivers throwing out beer bottles or sandwich wrappers, and we asked Daoud about it. "The people are protesting," he said. "The people don't like the prime minister. They like the King, but the prime minister is raising taxes, and this is their way of protesting." However, the reasons are apparently more complicated than his explanation, as I learned from this web site:



- <https://www.ecomena.org/litter-jordan/>. Whatever the cause(s), it is unsightly.
- Highway trash notwithstanding, if your goal is to visit the "Holy Land", you should definitely include Jordan along with Israel. Since our trip, we have talked with several friends and relatives who have visited Israel, some multiple times, but never went to Jordan. One reason is that before 1994 it was not possible for tourists visiting Israel to enter Jordan. Another reason is the perception that Jordan might not be safe. A third reason is that, done properly (i.e., more than just a quick visit from your cruise ship), it does add a couple of days or more to any Israel trip. But Jordan has so much to offer – Biblical and Roman sites, Petra, Wadi Rum, Dead Sea Resorts, as well as another perspective on the whole region, that it's well worth the time and effort.

Next: Part 5 - Petra, the Nabataeans, and the story of the New Zealand nurse who married a Bedouin and lived in a cave.