

Our First Trip to Israel (and Jordan)

By Larry Martin

Part 6 – Wadi Rum, the Dead Sea and Bethany

[Note: Part 6 continues an account of the Road Scholar 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 completed parts are posted at <http://www.lakesidepress.com/IsraelTrip.html>. There will be a total of 7 parts.]

This travelogue is mainly a chronology of what we did and saw day by day, but also a commentary on Israel's situation in the Middle East. A simple chronology risks boring the reader – who wants to read about someone else's trip? – and I've tried to spice it with many photos and some historical information. Commentary offered about Israel's precarious situation is just my opinion, and if it's provocative, well, that's not necessarily bad.

Part 6 covers our two days in Jordan. One goal is to show why, when next you visit Israel, you should consider crossing the Jordan River and see what the country has to offer (especially Petra, discussed in Part 5).

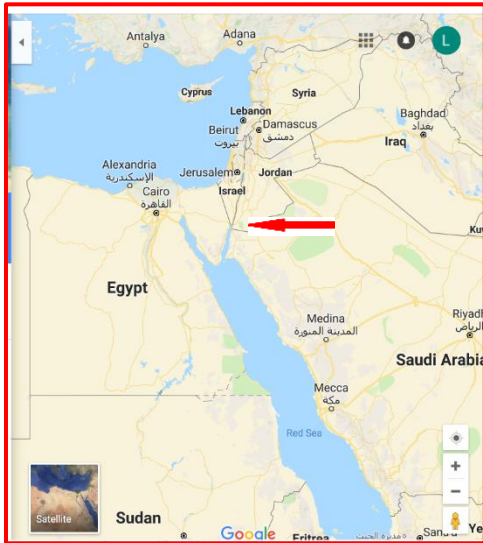
Monday, October 23, 2017

On leaving Petra we drove to Wadi Rum, a Jordanian national park. I had never heard of Wadi Rum before this trip. How many Jordanians have heard of our Death Valley? Same type of place: a huge national park, stunning desert landscape. It's also the kind of place tourists on their own (i.e., not part of a tour group) likely don't make an effort to visit. If you're in the area, go to Wadi Rum (the name is Arabic for "Roman Valley").

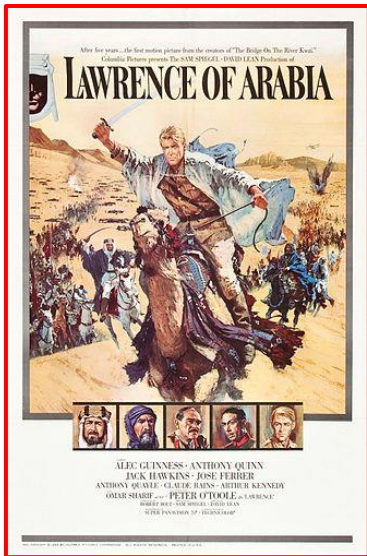


A view in Wadi Rum

Wadi Rum is located in southern Jordan, near the Gulf of Aqaba, which is an arm of the Red Sea (see red arrows).



TE Lawrence (“of Arabia”) spent some time in Wadi Rum as he was planning attacks on the Ottomans in WW1. A small part of the 1962 movie was filmed there as well.





After the trip I learned that parts of 16 other movies were filmed in Wadi Rum, including the recent hit *The Martian*. This link lists all the movies filmed there. http://www.imdb.com/search/title?locations=Wadi%20Rum,%20Jordan&ref=ttloc_loc_8



The park contains giant sandstone mountains that shoot straight out of the desert floor, like this one.

From the Visitors Center we boarded the back of jeep-like trucks to tour the park. When the truck got stuck in the sand the guides had push it free (lower right).



Two happy couples in back of a Wadi Rum tour truck.



Our first stop on the truck tour was to climb a sandy hill, with advice to do it barefoot. This was the softest sand we've ever walked in. At the top we had great views and picture opportunities.



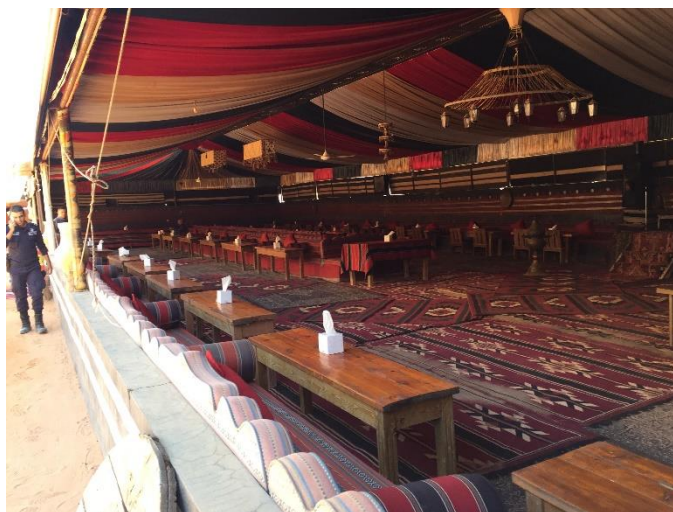
The next stop in Wadi Rum was for camel rides. We were each assigned a camel, and mounted while the animal kneeled. It was quite a jolt when the camel suddenly stood up. The top 3 pics on the next page the three steps involved: 1) pick out a willing camel; 2) sit on it; 3) stay seated once the camel stands up.



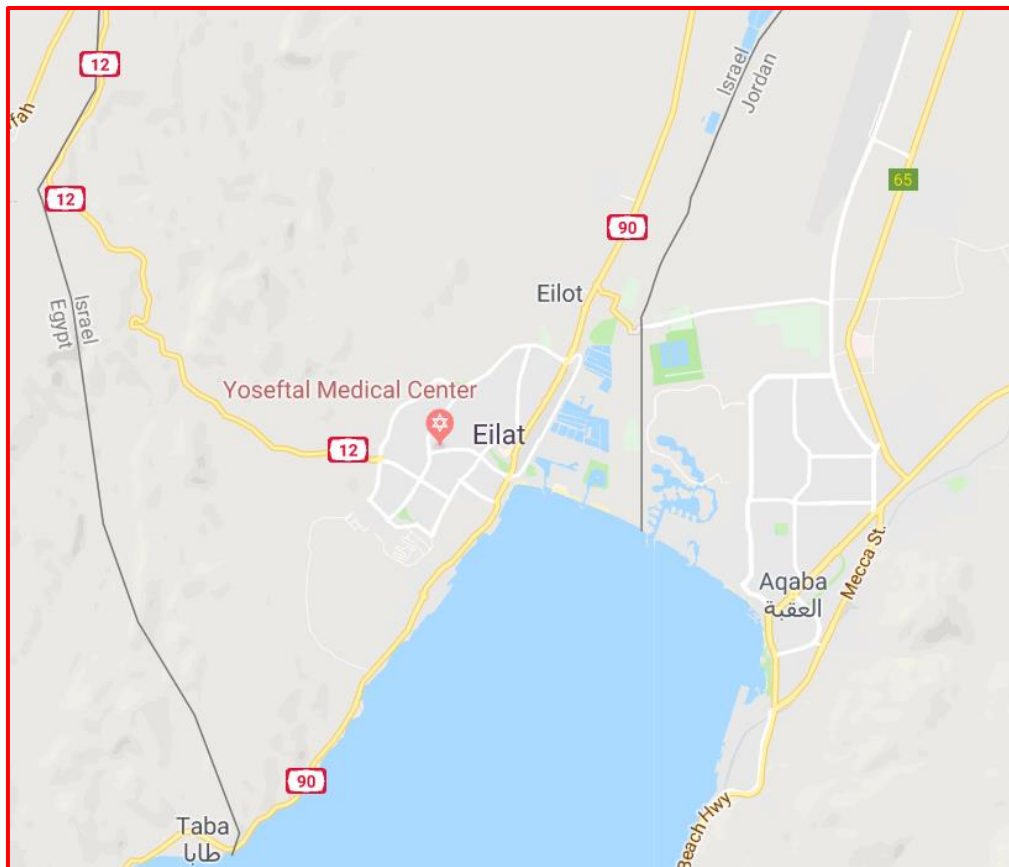
As for the ride itself, some thought it was fun. For me, the most uncomfortable ride imaginable. Also, once we were riding, taking pictures was hard, with one hand on the reins and the other holding the iPhone. My wife kept telling me to “put the phone away. Watch what you’re doing!” The guy in the orange shirt is me. The last picture on this page shows one of the camel guides, after the ride was over. I was glad to be standing again.



After the camel rides we drove to a desert “eco-lodge,” one of several in Wadi Rum and made up of semi-permanent tents. There we used the public bathroom and had a tour of the resort. The tents are rather luxurious, and include private bathrooms. The picture at the bottom is the dining area.



From Wadi Rum our motor coach took us west to Aqaba, on the Red Sea, for lunch. On the way into Aqaba we could easily see, in the distance, the Israeli town of Eilat. They could be one metropolitan area, but the border makes them two totally separate communities.



Our Jordanian guide Daoud complained about the unequal treatment at the border, stating that Israelis can show up and get into Jordan quickly, always the same day, but a Jordanian has to first apply for a visa “four-six weeks in advance.” He was quite vocal about how unfair this was.

Later, our Israeli guide Jonathan gave two cogent reasons for the differences in border policing. One, Israel has to make sure no terrorists enter the country. “Jordan doesn’t have to worry about terrorists coming from Israel,” he said.

Two, Israel needs to make sure Jordanians don’t enter with the intention of overstaying the visa and working in Israel, like many immigrants to the U.S. do. “Israel’s economy is much stronger than Jordan’s,” he said, “and many Jordanians would love to live and work in Israel. Jordan doesn’t have to worry about Israelis crossing the border to find work.” There are no Jews living in Jordan (they were all expelled in 1948), whereas there are 1.8 million Arab citizens in Israel, or about 21% of the population. It would be very easy for a Jordanian to disappear into the local economy.

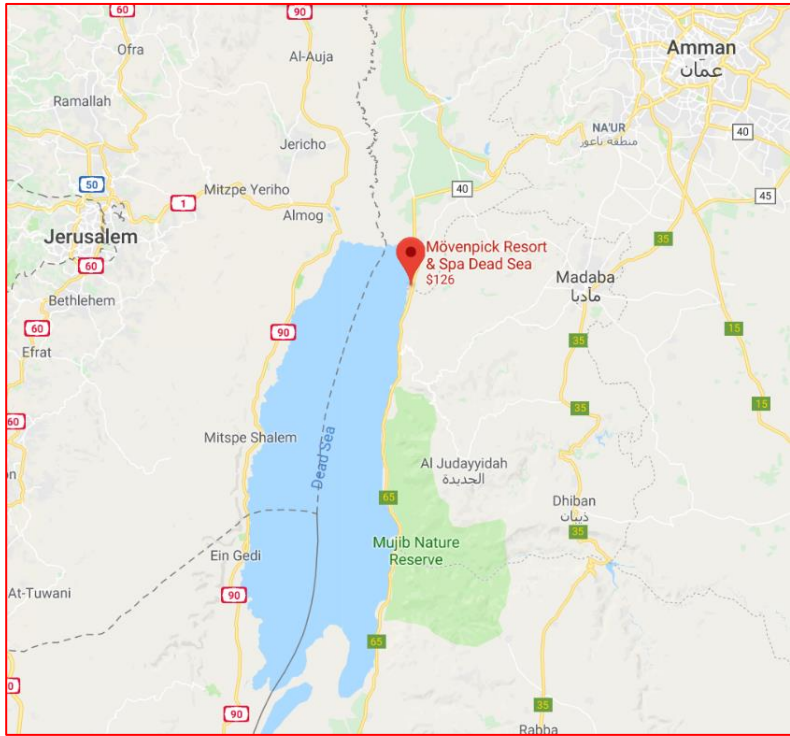
Initially, Daoud's complaint seemed valid. But then Jonathan's explanation also seemed valid. It comes down to a matter of national security. Jordan doesn't have to worry about surviving as a nation. Israel does.

We had lunch in Aqaba, in the restaurant shown below, then headed up north to the top of the Dead Sea. As we approached our Dead Sea resort the sun began to set in the west, lighting up the Sea.



After sunset we checked into the very nice Movenpick Resort and Spa. It is a vast resort, and includes a main hotel, many villas and swimming pools on land that descends from the highway down to the Dead Sea.

There are many upscale hotels and resorts on the Jordanian side, and few (if any) on the Israeli side. The reason, we were told, is that the western shore (in Israel) is plagued with sink holes, stopping investment there. The land on the eastern (Jordanian) shore is much more stable. If you want a Dead Sea Resort, your best bet is Jordan.



In the lobby a hotel employee met new arrivals with a huge and weird-looking juice dispenser. From a nozzle he fills a glass and hands it to you. When he put the contraption down I tried lifting it – heavy! I estimate at least 20-30 lbs.

BETHANY

The next morning, October 24, before our much-anticipated afternoon swim in the Dead Sea, we took a bus ride to the Jordan River, where Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist. The place is called Bethany (not the Bethany near Jerusalem, but a different one).

Like so much of ancient history, exact locations are in doubt. The place we visited is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and is generally assumed to be where the baptism took place, though it is not certain. The orange square next to the Jordan river in the picture below is the UNESCO site, known as Al-Maghtas.

I found this site geographically the most confusing of all the Biblical ones we visited. I will quote the Wikipedia entry about the location, to show the current state of knowledge.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al-Maghtas>

Al-Maghtas, meaning "baptism" or "immersion" in Arabic, is an archaeological World Heritage site in Jordan on the east bank of the Jordan River, officially known as **Baptism Site "Bethany Beyond the Jordan" (Al-Maghtas)**. It is considered to be the original location of the Baptism of Jesus and the ministry of John the Baptist and has been venerated as such since at least the Byzantine period.



Al-Maghtas includes two principal archaeological areas. The remnants of a monastery on a mound known as Jabal Mar-Elias (Elijah's Hill) and an area close to the river with remains of churches, baptism ponds and pilgrim and hermit dwellings. The two areas are connected by a stream called Wadi Kharrar.

The strategic location between Jerusalem and the King's Highway is already evident from the Book of Joshua report about the Israelites crossing the Jordan there. Jabal Mar-Elias is traditionally identified as the site of the ascension of the prophet Elijah to heaven. The complete area was abandoned after the 1967 Six-Day War, when both banks of the Jordan became part of the frontline. The area was heavily mined then.

After the signing of the Israel–Jordan peace treaty in 1994, de-mining of area soon took place after an initiative of Jordanian royalty, namely Prince Ghazi. The site has then seen several archaeological digs, 4 papal visits and state visits and attracts tourists and pilgrimage activity. In 2015, the site was designated as a World Heritage site by UNESCO, excluding the western side of the river. Approximately 81,000 people visited the site in 2016, mostly European, American and Arab tourists. Thousands flock to the site on January 6 to mark Epiphany.

There were apparently ancient churches in this area, as mentioned in the church poster below, and now the area has several new churches; some are shown on the next page.



Churches Built in the memory of the baptism of Jesus

To start with it is of utmost importance to note that the river Jordan arrived at this point at the time Jesus was baptized and when the churches were built, and John the Baptist spring met the river at this point. Today the river is further away.

It is at this point where John who lived east of the river Jordan opposite Jericho met Jesus and baptized Him.

Five uniquely designed churches and a unique cruciform baptistery that used the water of the Jordan where carefully described by pilgrims to be built from the 5th up to the 12th centuries at the place where Jesus was baptized.


To our excitement, the discoveries fully matched with the description of the pilgrims who visited the site following the trail of the Prophets. But our question was, "why did early Christians insist to build churches at the point where there is no community to serve? In the middle of the wilderness at a point where earthquakes or floods caused the destruction of one church after the other?"

The answer was clear!

Depending on the Bible, the mosaic map of the Holy Land, pilgrims' accounts and the archaeological discoveries, we see the determination of believers to build memorials, just east of the Jordan river, where Jesus was baptized and Christianity started.



GREEK ORTHODOX PATRIARCHATE
GREEK ORTHODOX ARCHDIOCES



ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST CHURCH
JORDAN RIVER

ΙΕΡΟΣ ΝΑΟΣ
ΑΓΙΟΥ ΙΩΑΝΝΟΥ

The picture on right shows ongoing excavations near Jordan River, the assumed location where Jesus was baptized.

Interestingly, the river is very narrow here, more like a stream. At this point the east bank of the Jordan River, Israel, is just a stone's throw away from the west bank, Jordan; perhaps 20 yards at most. We saw African natives being baptized only a few yards from where we were standing. We were in Jordan, they were in Israel.





I am dipping my hand into the Jordan River in Jordan. The floating line a few yards away is the border between Jordan and Israel. The picture on the right shows the approach to this part of the Jordan River. The people on the steps are in Jordan; those in the distance are in Israel, and behind them Israeli flags can be seen. Below is a closer view of the Israeli flags; note the video camera on the wall (enlargement on right). The bottom two pictures show baptism of



African tourists; they are all on the Israeli side.



THE DEAD SEA

The Dead Sea is not a sea, but a landlocked lake. Half is in Jordan and half in Israel (see map Page 9). The northern half of the western shore lies within the Palestinian West Bank and has been under Israeli occupation since the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. The Jordan River, from which the Dead Sea receives nearly all its water, flows from the north into the lake.



The Dead Sea has the lowest elevation and is the lowest body of water on the surface of Earth. For several decades in the mid-20th century the standard value given for the surface level of the lake was some 1,300 feet (400 meters) below sea level.

Beginning in the 1960s, however, Israel and Jordan began diverting much of the Jordan River's flow and increased the use of the lake's water for commercial purposes. The result has been a precipitous drop in the Dead Sea's water level. The lake is now more than 100 feet below the mid-20th-century figure—i.e., about 1,410 feet (430 meters) below sea level. The lake continues to drop about 3 feet annually.

It was quite a hike from the resort down to the Dead Sea. The Dead Sea would have been above these stairs 50 years ago.

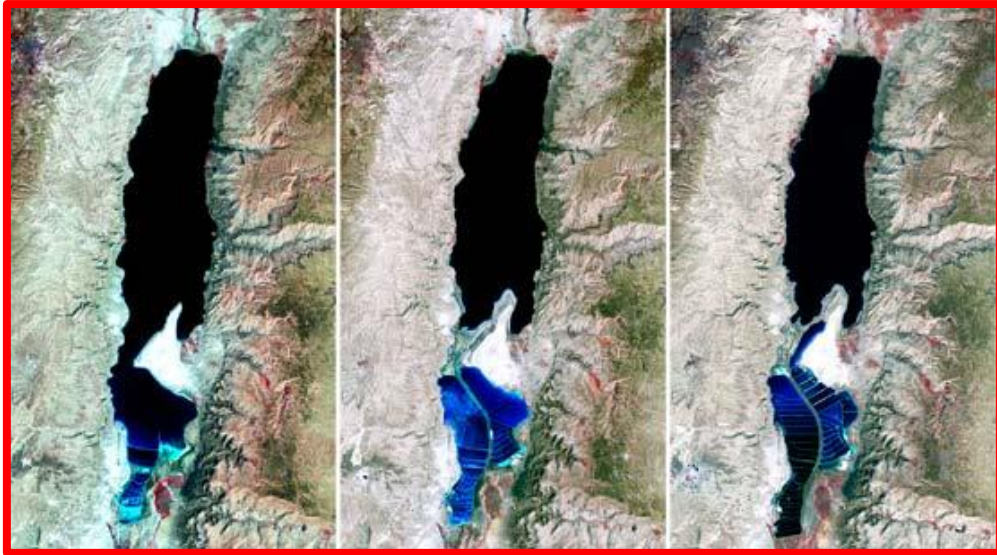
DOWN



UP



These satellite images show the shrinking of the Dead Sea: Left 1972; Middle 1989; Right 2011



How salty is it? Very: 33.7% salt, or 8.6 times the ocean's salinity. Because of all the salt you cannot sink; buoyancy is too great. It's fun to float in the Dead Sea, but don't taste the water; it burns your tongue. The mud from the sea is supposed to be therapeutic and several people lathered their bodies with it. We watched.



NEXT: Return to Israel: Jerusalem and Tel Aviv