

Middle East

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TNT MAGAZINE

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Gallipoli, Turkey

TURKEY

Population: 70.4 million
Capital: Ankara
Languages: Turkish, Greek, Armenian, Arabic, Kurdish
Religions: Sunni Muslim
Currency: Turkish lira
Further information: www.tourismturkey.org

SYRIA

Population: 18.8 million
Capital: Damascus
Languages: Arabic, Kurdish, Armenian, Aramaic
Religions: Sunni Muslim, Alawite, Druze and other Muslim sects, Christian
Currency: Syrian Pound
Further information: www.syriatourism.org

ISRAEL

Population: 6.3 million
Capital: Jerusalem (contested)
Languages: Hebrew, Arabic, English
Religions: Jewish, Muslim, Christian
Currency: new Israeli shekel
Further information: www.goisrael.com



Judean desert, Israel



“Lucky for us, Ramses II had far too much time on his hands.”



"In Iran you will experience hospitality like no other place on Earth."

Mt Sinai, Egypt



EGYPT

Population: 78.7 million
Capital: Cairo
Languages: Arabic
Religions: Muslim (mostly Sunni), Coptic, Christian
Currency: Egyptian pound
Further information: www.egypt.travel

LEBANON

Population: 3.8 million
Capital: Beirut
Languages: Arabic, French, English, Armenian
Religions: Muslim, Christian
Currency: Lebanese pound
Further information: www.destinationlebanon.gov.lb

Esfahan, Iran



IRAN

Population: 68 million
Capital: Tehran
Languages: Persian, Turkic, Kurdish, Luri, Balochi, Arabic
Religions: Shi'a Muslim, Sunni Muslim, Zoroastrian, Christian, Baha'i
Currency: Iranian rial
Further information: www.irpedia.com

JORDAN

Population: 5.9 million
Capital: Amman
Languages: Arabic, English
Religions: Sunni Muslim, Shi'ite Muslim
Currency: Jordanian dinar
Further information: www.see-jordan.com

Why go to the Middle East?

The Middle East has never been more accessible for travellers. Long considered by many as too dangerous, it's an image which is gradually being shaken off as more and more folk choose to come here.

What makes this place all the more attractive to travellers is, once here,

you're left pondering what the rest of the world was worried about?

The people are friendly and their character colourful, the cultures are rich and the variety of life and the language is something not easily found anywhere else. What are you waiting for?



Beirut, Lebanon

Cappadocia, Turkey



TURKEY

www.tourismturkey.org

If there is one country that successfully merges Middle Eastern tradition with Western influences it would have to be Turkey. It is a country that boasts a diverse mix of culture, traditions and contemporary lifestyle — all laid out on a backdrop of ancient ruins, spectacular coastline and natural wonders.

But as much as this is a country which stands alone for its attractions, the very people who call this place home are its greatest asset. Most Turks are workaholics who love a good party and will go to great lengths to ensure your glass is always full of raki. They take pride in their culture, heritage and beliefs — but don't take themselves too seriously either. The Turks possess a dry wit and attitude to life akin to the increasing number of independent travellers who choose to come here.

Whether you're sipping lentil soup in the narrow cobbled streets of old town Istanbul, raging into the small hours in a Bodrum bar or diving into the warm waters of the Mediterranean, any Turkish itinerary is worth extending. Just remember to call the folks occasionally.

TOP FIVE

- 1 Cappadocia** Underground cities, entire communities carved into volcanic caves, crevasses and valleys. Add some Muppets and it'd be Fraggie Rock.
- 2 Gallipoli** Everything you ever learned about the campaign can't really prepare you for the overwhelming experience of standing on these shores.
- 3 Oludeniz beach** Dive into the warm crystal-clear waters, paraglide off the surrounding cliffs or eat a kebab on the pebbled beach.
- 4 Gulet cruise** The time of day is easily lost when you're cruising the Mediterranean coast, drinking cheap beer, swimming and reading *The Da Vinci Code*.
- 5 Istanbul** A spin cycle of tradition, culture and entertainment, Istanbul is the only city in the world that links two continents.

SYRIA

www.syriatourism.org

To the less travelled, gallivanting across Syria could seem like a daunting undertaking. It need not be. In recent years the country has become far more accessible, but it still throws up the types of challenges every backpacker thrives on.

The vast majority of people who travel here do so because they've heard others have had the experience of a lifetime. Everything about Syria has an exuberant quality — from its historical monuments and cities locked in time to its rich culture and contemporary traditions. Locals will spin you stories in broken English and profess to living in the greatest country in the world. Once you've experienced all Syria has to offer, it might be hard to prove otherwise.

TOP FIVE

- 1 Damascus** Take a walk through one of the oldest cities in the world. Just don't lean on anything...
- 2 Bosra** Famed for its Roman amphitheatre. Yes, another one. But they reckon this is one of the best in the world.
- 3 Palmyra** An oasis in the desert, this former kingdom is rated as the best archaeological site in the country.
- 4 Arwad Island** Syria's only island comes complete with ancient fortresses and all the luxuries of a modern lifestyle.
- 5 The Aleppo Citadel** A fierce and impressive example of military architecture.



Damascus, Syria

Men returning from morning prayer, Israel



ISRAEL

www.goisrael.com

If you've read the book, say the Israeli tourism board, you'll love the country. Slow readers should probably just flick through the Bible's best bits and then book a flight.

Regardless of your religious beliefs, upbringing or opinion on its tumultuous history, Israel is worth checking out. Its potential for travellers is endless with all the elements for a great escape. It has the beaches, it has the nightlife and it has the history. Follow in the footsteps of Jesus and plenty of other Biblical characters and finally discover what all the fuss has been about.

TOP FIVE

- 1 Jerusalem** If there's an old city with more historical significance anywhere in the world we'd like you to find it.
- 2 Sea of Galilee** Just because Jesus walked on water here doesn't mean you can too. Take floaties.
- 3 Eilat** Kick your shoes off and get some fins on at the Red Sea resort town.
- 4 Negev Desert** Take a camel ride through the heart of the holy land.
- 5 Tel Aviv** A rave junkie's paradise. The sun will rise and fall and you'll still be carving up that dance floor. Eieeew, but not in those pants ...

EGYPT

www.egypt.travel

We know it's not technically the Middle East, lying as it does in north Africa, but we've included it here as many travellers include Egypt on their Middle Eastern itinerary. And flicking through a travel brochure or watching a documentary just doesn't do this country justice. It's impossible to appreciate the vast expanse and rich culture of Egypt without trudging the desert sands yourself.

Regardless of your interest in all things ancient, the bold reminders of fallen civilisations and powerful empires hold universal appeal to everybody who comes here. It's a curious mix of contemporary living and rattling reminders of a previous existence many still struggle to comprehend. And then there are the people — they don't mind helping you part with your cash but are just as willing to ensure your Egyptian experience is a memorable one. They needn't try very hard: from the turquoise waters of Alexandria to the isolation of the Western Desert, if there truly was a magical experience to be had, it's to be had here.

TOP FIVE

- 1 The Pyramids of Giza and the Sphinx** Nowhere in the world is there a more ancient architecture. They sure don't build 'em like they used to.
- 2 Abu Simbel** Lucky for us, the Pharaoh Ramses II had far too much time on his hands.
- 3 Dahab** Life's problems are too easily excused after a few days of seafood, sand and spliffage.
- 4 Mt Sinai** Trudge the footsteps of the prophet Moses and climb a mountain of Biblical proportions.
- 5 The Nile** Any day's a good day when you're silently drifting down the longest river in the world.

The Sphinx and Pyramids, Giza, Egypt



Baalbek ruins, Lebanon



LEBANON

www.destinationlebanon.gov.lb

Lebanon could easily be regarded as just another one of those countries in the Middle East which for years has been dogged by ongoing violence and political unease. It wouldn't be an incorrect assumption, but there is loads more to this nation than most realise. The contemporary aspects of life here have propelled it to become a country well coifed. It certainly boasts elements of style, fashion and popular culture that other Middle Eastern nations would struggle to match.

This is also one of few Middle Eastern nations to have capitalised on its ability to provide travellers with outdoor recreational pursuits, targeting sports lovers in recent years and succeeding. Lebanon has crystal clear coastlines, arid deserts and snow-peaked mountains — all attracting more and more independent travellers each and every year.

TOP FIVE

- 1 **Beirut** The nation's capital is also a cosmopolitan centre of café and club culture.
- 2 **Jbail (Byblos)** A quaint fishing port cum medieval town with cramped alleyways, markets and the odd crusader castle or two.
- 3 **Qadisha** The Holy Valley hides hundreds of caves and shelters for lonely monks and hermits.
- 4 **Baalbek** Unesco didn't list this place as a world cultural heritage site without good reason.
- 5 **Tyre (Sour)** The Romans have been at it again. This time they left numerous columns, archways and thermal baths. Damn they had it good.

IRAN

www.irpedia.com

Travel in Iran and you are likely to experience the hospitality of strangers like few places on Earth. This is a far safer nation than the news channels will have you believe.

For too long the country has been controlled by a government with an unscrupulous hold on the lives of all who live here. To experience it will leave you grateful for the freedom we take for granted. It will also leave you overwhelmed by the constant generosity of your Persian hosts. No matter where you go, you will meet people who'll want to show you what their home has to offer — and they don't expect anything in return. They're happy enough to practise their English and impart you with some traditional tea-drinking skills.

A farmer outside the city of Shiraz, Iran



TOP FIVE

- 1 Tehran** A frantic mix of market life, crammed apartment blocks, historic museums, obscene traffic and slogans disparaging the yanks. Bless.
- 2 Esfahan** A city of prestige with century-old bridges, fountains, mosques and gardens, and home to Imam Khomeini Square — the second largest public square in the world.
- 3 Caspian Sea** Check out the coastline at the largest lake in the world. But there'll be no romantic interludes among the crashing waves — it's forbidden for men and women to swim together.
- 4 Yazd** One of the more relaxed centres in the country, where wind towers provide air-conditioning and most folk sleep through the better part of the day to avoid the stifling heat.
- 5 Kish Island** About the only place in the entire country where you can get your kit off and not get arrested for it.

JORDAN

www.see-jordan.com

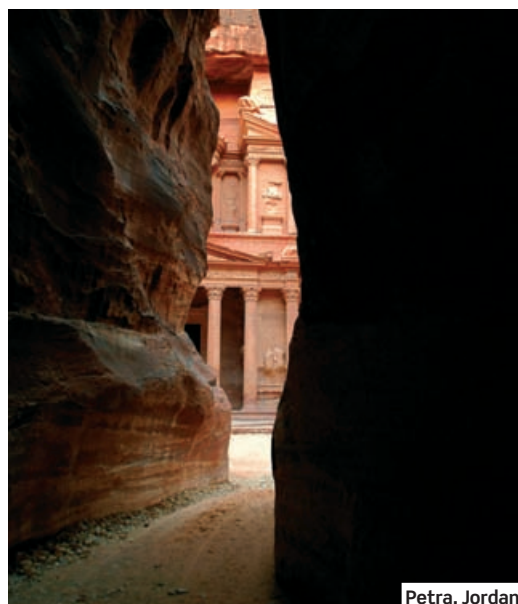
Most people are likely to know more about Jordan, the celebrity, than Jordan, the Hashemite Kingdom. But there's nothing fake about this nation. And travellers have woken up to what the country has to offer.

Desolate and bare in summer, lush and green in winter, the nation is far more beautiful and historic than it's given credit for. But its people have known this all along. In the capital, Amman, you'll find the locals smoking a Marlboro Red from one hand, extending the other hand to shake yours. Don't bother with the 'quit' campaign though — their last pack-a-day King died of cancer and they still don't get it.

Jordan's greatest assets remain its many ancient sites of Biblical significance and others of natural wonder. If you're not raising an eyebrow at the salty remains of Lot's wife, you'll be stretching back in the Dead Sea pondering how damned uninteresting life could have been if there hadn't been this adventure to add to your travelogue.

TOP FIVE

- 1 Petra** Close your mouth. The very spot where Indiana Jones ended his last crusade could possibly prove the very reason you chose to travel in the first place.
- 2 The River Jordan** Wash those sins away. Jesus was baptised here and so too was former Korn guitarist Brian Welch. Rock.
- 3 The Dead Sea** Pass the salt. This water will keep any lard-arse afloat.
- 4 Mt Nebo** Let's get spiritual, spiritual ... Look over the Promised Land at the very site where Moses breathed his last.
- 5 Wadi Rum desert** A testament to the old, or rather the Old Testament. Trudge the path of the Israelites. But, erm, take a map this time.



Petra, Jordan

Ephesus, Turkey



The best bits

RUINS

Architects back then certainly didn't do things by halves. Mighty rulers across the land could kick back and be hand-fed grapes, secure behind their high-walled cities with mighty pillars, archways and auditoriums. And, with no modern day machinery, it's hard to fathom how they even went about it in the first place. Nevertheless, you can't go past the numerous ruins scattered across the Middle East for a better representation of what life was like thousands of years ago.

JERASH (JORDAN)

Romans sure knew how to build em' to last. The ancient city of Jerash is 6500 years old. If a wander through these ancient corridors doesn't bowl you over, the dozens of Jordanians trying to sell you tethered postcards will.

EPHESUS (TURKEY)

There's a good chance after a few weeks sauntering from one leftover city to another, ruins can become a little passé. Not here. Take a wander through Ephesus and you can really get a feel for what the place would have been like in its hey day. It seems residents certainly lived the high life with hot baths, a library, an auditorium or two, a prostitute parlour and a group toilet. What fun.

PALMYRA (SYRIA)

Easily the country's greatest tourist attraction and the stomping ground for descendants of Cleopatra, Palmyra was the place to be a couple of thousand years ago. All was good until it was levelled by an earthquake in 1089AD.



Abu Simbel, Egypt

ABU SIMBEL (EGYPT)

OK, yes, the Pyramids and Sphinx are spectacular but it's hard to go past the handy work of the Pharaoh Ramses II, deep in the country's south. He sure didn't cut any corners when it came to creating grand scale images of himself. And, as the whole concept of the design was to scare off would-be invaders, it's ironic that these days it attracts more visitors than ever before.

PERSEPOLIS (IRAN)

The Persians sure knew how to party. Rumour has it that this place was only built for new year celebrations. The intricately detailed carvings tell the story of this magnificent party palace. Alexander the Great eventually pillaged the place and burnt it to the ground. These days, you can happily wander around what remains and pretend you're its sole visitor for the day — chances are you will be.

BAALBEK (LEBANON)

At 57ft high, the Roman pillars of Baalbek remain the tallest ever erected. Constructed to pay homage to the Greek gods, the temple and surrounds was the handy work of no less than 10 serving Roman emperors.

JERICO (ISRAEL)

Despite the efforts of some kid called Joshua, who in the Old Testament brought the walls crumbling down with a blow of his trumpet, this place has stood the test of time (10,000 years to be exact) and the tarnish from the hundreds of thousands who come here every year.



Dahab's Blue Hole, Egypt

DIVING

The Mediterranean and Red Sea coasts offer some of the most magical diving anywhere in the world — the deeper you go, the better it gets.

There are plenty of respectable operators at coastal resorts across the region to ensure your safety. Five-day theoretical and practical learn-to-dive courses are easily found and experienced divers can tackle advanced courses which include off-shore, wreck and night dives.

ISRAEL

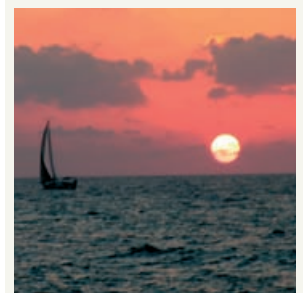
The coastal resort of Eilat sits at the nation's southernmost tip and is your best bet for underwater action and a good spot for your first wreck diving experience. Lots of variety and plenty of recreational options on the surface. See www.aqua-sport.com.

EGYPT

Beginners are best to dive in Dahab, where there are a number of simple but stunning sites. The Blue Hole is definitely a box worth ticking. There are literally hundreds of other sites along the peninsula but the resort of Sharm El-Sheik is your best port for complete dive packages and links to long lost wrecks. Among them the World War II freighter Thistlegorm, which was sunk near the Suez Canal with cargo including trucks, motorbikes and locomotives. There are some good options for lazy reef dives out of Hurghada but for something entirely different, descend on the ancient relics hidden beneath the Mediterranean off the coast of Alexandria. See www.sinaidivers.com or www.desert-divers.com.



Chill out in Dahab, Egypt



OFF THE BEATEN TRACK

The Middle East has plenty of places worthy of your bare feet and dreadlocks. When one monotonous tourist destination blurs into the next — it's time you got off the beaten track. If you're willing to forego the certainty of reliable plumbing, there is no end to the deserted beaches and friendly, idyllic communities waiting to be experienced.

JORDAN

The coastal resort of Aqaba is teeming with life above and below the surface. The Cedar Pride — a long sunk Lebanese freighter — is the most notable wreck. See www.alcazarhotel.com. For a complete wrap, check out www.redsea.com.

PARTYING

There are some serious nights out to be had in the Middle East and where better to start than in Tel Aviv? The Israeli answer to Ibiza is a rave capital: whether it's break-beats, house, drum 'n' bass or trance, there really need be no quiet nights in. DJs from around the world come here and thousands of clubbing trolls whistle, gnaw and shudder at the perfection of it all. See www.tel-aviv-insider.com.

But Tel Aviv doesn't get all the clubbing kudos. Beirut is also known for its throbbing bass lines in

underground venues. The beat will get you moving in places like BO-18, a popular club with a removable roof. You'll be forgiven for forgetting — however momentarily — that this is an Islamic state. See www.travel-to-lebanon.com.

Bodrum in Turkey is gaining a reputation as a party destination with all the requirements for a good time. There are plenty of clubs including open-air options against a backdrop of ancient ruins, palm trees and blue sea. Add the national drink, raki, and you've got yourself one hell of a party.

Then there's Sultanahmet in the heart of Istanbul's old town; the backpacker strip Akbiyik Caddesi will be the likely reason for you missing that flight. A week here is too easily lost, as one long night merges with the next. True debauchery.

In fact, the only place you're not likely to cross a solid nightlife is in Iran, where mixed socialising in public is prohibited by law.

OLYMPUS (TURKEY) www.olymposturkmen treehouses.com

A community of tree houses and like-minded travellers escaping life for a week or three.

SHIRAZ (IRAN)

The city is a little crazy, but it's your best point for tours into the deserts surrounding the city, where you can relax tent-side with Bedouin families who've known no other way of life.

GREAT SAND SEA (EGYPT)

Explore a pocket of the Sahara in a four-wheel drive. It's just you and hundreds of miles of pure white sand. www.tour-egypt.net

THE CEDARS (LEBANON)

Skiing in Lebanon? Yep, the country's reputation as a ski destination is growing. We reckon there's a deserted mountain at The Cedars resort with your name on it. Check out www.skileb.com

Tel Aviv, Israel





FURTHER RESOURCES

LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

Egypt

www.egypt.travel

Turkey

www.tourismturkey.org

Israel

www.goisrael.com

Jordan

www.see-jordan.com

Syria

www.syriatourism.org

Lebanon

www.destinationlebanon.gov.lb

Iran

www.irpedia.com

EXPERT KNOWLEDGE

www.tntmagazine.com

www.lonelyplanet.com

www.roughguides.com

FILMS

Iran:

Not Without My Daughter (1991)

Turkey:

Midnight Express (1978)

Egypt:

Cleopatra (1963)

Israel:

The Passion Of The Christ (2004)

General:

Ben Hur (1959); The Ten Commandments (1956).

BOOKS

Most of the Bible.

Bad Lands: A Tourist on the Axis of Evil (Tony Wheeler, 2007)

GETTING THERE

Most major airlines fly to all Middle Eastern capital cities but it's worth doing your homework to get the best deal. See *TNT* for flight deals.

GETTING AROUND

Getting around in these parts can be hit and miss. Some local operators provide door-to-door service, while others can leave you scratching your head on the side of a deserted road.

In most cities across the Middle East, the easiest way to get around is by cab. Settle a price with the driver before you get in, then sit back and enjoy the ride of your life. Traffic lights are a forsaken commodity in most busy centres.

Domestic bus services and train links are your cheapest alternative for tackling big distances but it's advisable to check with the nearest tourist information centre regarding reliability and safety.

When training it, sleepers offer privacy and peace of mind and often don't cost much more than a regular seat. The train link between Damascus in Syria and Amman in Jordan is nostalgic but long (www.nabataea.net/hejaz.html).

Turkey offers a reliable hop-on hop-off service (www.feztravel.com), while Egypt has a similar service tailored to independent travellers (www.gobusegypt.com). In Israel, United Tours (www.inisrael.com) offers a good daily bus service. In Iran, buses are dirt cheap, but so are domestic flights. Flying between Tehran and other major centres can cost as little as £10.

Check *TNT Magazine* for tour companies operating in the region. There are many packages available which provide excellent access to key sites at a reasonable price.

VISAS

Turkey: New Zealanders can travel in Turkey without a visa for up to three months.

Australians and Brits need to obtain a three-month multi-entry visitors' visa which you can get upon arrival in the country for £20. South Africans must arrange a visa prior to arrival. See www.turkish-consulate.org.uk/en/visa.htm for how to apply in London.

Israel: Antipodeans and South Africans must have a passport valid at least six months from the intended date of entering the country but do not need a visa.

Ask to have your entry card stamped instead of your passport, to avoid problems of being refused entry elsewhere (see below). See www.israeemb.org.

Jordan: All travellers need a visa to enter Jordan. These are obtainable on arrival for a fee from all entry points except the King Hussein/Allenby Bridge. See www.jordanembassyuk.org.

Iran: Israelis are the only nationality prevented from entering Iran. You will need to apply for your visa before arrival by contacting an Iranian travel agent who can register you with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Alternatively, an invitation from an Iranian can also get you a stamp but it may take a couple of trips to your nearest embassy. The cost of a visa shouldn't be more than £30. See www.irantour.org

Syria: All tourists need a visa and you'll have to

chase it up before you get there. You will be refused entry if you have an Israeli stamp in your passport. Multiple entry six-month tourist visas are usually £50. See www.syria.embassyhomepage.com

Lebanon: Australians and South Africans must get a visa before their arrival. New Zealanders can get one upon entry, but this is a situation open to change. Forget it if you have an Israeli stamp. A multiple-entry six-month visa should cost £50. See www.lebanon.embassyhomepage.com

Egypt: Aussies and Kiwis can purchase a visa on arrival for around £10. South Africans need to apply for a visa before they arrive. See www.egypt.embassyhomepage.com

ACCOMMODATION

There are as many exclusive options as there are cheap alternatives, but for the vast majority of the time, you will get what you pay for. Hostels are cheap (and sometimes nasty) but staff are almost always prepared to share advice, maps and some pretty average looking breakfasts. Most hotel operators prefer you pay in cash — in places like Syria and Iran it will be your only option. With the exception of Jordan, a hotel stop could prove far cheaper than you expect and make a nice change to sharing a bunk with two strangers shagging above you. See www.hostels.com for the cheapest options.

CULTURAL SENSITIVITY

In Jordan, Turkey and Egypt, visitors can generally dress casually, but when outdoors in Iran, and in certain places across Syria, women must cover their heads, arms and legs, and men should wear trousers and a suitable shirt. Showing too much skin is considered an offence. Be courteous and dress appropriately when visiting religious sites.

SAFETY

The Middle East has gained a reputation as a dangerous destination over the years, no thanks to ongoing hostilities. Foreign affairs departments in most Western countries advise extreme caution for folk trekking around, especially if they are alone. But, truth be known, the inherent dangers are easily forgotten once you arrive. Locals are extremely friendly and welcoming. It is unlikely you'll become a target by travelling here, but you can't rule it out. While not vital, registering with your national foreign affairs department makes sense — especially when travelling independently in Iran, Syria, Lebanon and Israel. See the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs (www.smarttraveller.gov.au); New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs (www.mft.govt.nz); Department of Foreign Affairs South Africa (www.dfa.gov.za); British Foreign and Commonwealth Office (www.fco.gov.uk).

HEALTH

There are no specific health requirements for entry into the Middle East but there are a few nasties around so it pays to know the basics. Take a decent medical pack for the road (www.e-med.co.uk), only drink bottle water and always use condoms. See www.travelvacs.com for vaccination advice.

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