

## JORDAN

Last night, as planned we went out to the Pyramids in the evening for the Sound and Light Show. We were told to allow about an hour and a half to get there, and the hotel put on a driver for us. However, the journey took us just 25 minutes through heavy Cairo traffic. To say the driver was something of a maniac compared with even my driving should indicate something of the journey. He was fast, sounding his horn constantly, swerving in between cars and having to slam on his brakes.

At one stage, when Dominic told him that he supported Manchester United, we almost ended up down an open drain, where the workman simply ducked when he surfaced at the wrong time.

And then, when we got to the Pyramids, we discovered his plan. There were plenty of shops still open, where no doubt he would have had a cut of whatever we paid on anything. Needless to say, with space primary in our luggage, neither Dominic nor I have any intention of buying anything. The driver soon saw that he was onto a loser, and allowed us to go into the Pyramid site where the Japanese version was showing.

We had a drink, sat down and waited for the sky to turn completely dark and the performance to start at 9.30 pm.



It has actually improved since I last saw it, and the use of lasers gave the written facts and the oral facts were being given – about the height, the number of stones, the period, etc of building each pyramid. The whole show told the story from the Sphinx's point of view – having been there for over 10,000 years – and what it had seen over the centuries.





Afterwards, we knew it would not take us long to get back to the hotel – again just 25 minutes, and we were back at the security checks to get us into the hotel. These days, to protect the valuable tourist trade, a sniffer-dog checks every car before it is allowed near hotel premises, and even our driver was a little put out that he had to open the boot (trunk) of his car so that it could be checked before we were let out.

On entering the hotel there was a welcome sound that greeted us, that I had hoped we would have before Dominic left Egypt – an Egyptian wedding reception, along with all the music, dancing and yelling/screaming. It was something to really witness.

Then, as with all good days, we went to bed!! We had an early rise.

DAY 4 – 27<sup>th</sup> June 2008

We started off at 6.30 am today – first of all to try and pack (why is that I managed to get everything in the suitcase on the way out, but now it will not close – even though I haven't added anything?) Then after breakfast we headed for the airport.

Cairo airport was somewhat chaotic. I thought it had been modernised, but fortunately our guide took us through the system, otherwise we would have been somewhat lost. It took an age to check in, even though there was no-one ahead of us, go through passport control (again with no-one ahead of us – they needed our immigration card completed on the way in, now it was an emigration card on the way out) and finally we made it into the departure lounge.

One of the useful perks that I have picked up in my travels is a card that allows me access to First Class or Business Lounges at airports, rather than sitting on the uncomfortable seats that are to be found near departure gates. However, the First Class Lounge at Cairo, though comfortable and having free drinks and snacks, had seating for only about 20 people. It took a little time to establish our claim to two seats which became empty as a flight was called.

Our flight from Cairo to Amman was with Royal Jordanian Airways. It should have left at 11.00 am, but we still had not boarded at 12.30 pm. Finally, buses arrived to take us to the plane, and we left as soon as we could.

The flight was interesting for the route that it took. We flew over the Suez Canal, over the Sinai Desert, over the Red Sea, before turning north into Jordan, flying over Mount Nebo (where Moses died, having seen the Holy Land), and up the Jordanian side of the Dead Sea. The hot air currents from the desert caused a little turbulence on the way into Queen Alia Airport.

One advantage in flying a national carrier is that we can get to the terminal quickly. That meant that once we had negotiated buying a Visa for Ten Jordanian Dinars, we could go through passport control and claim our baggage.

But the baggage claim at Jordan was very slow. It seemed that there was just one person on the job, who loaded a trolley with four or five bags at a time, and put them onto the carousel for the passengers. My luggage was out reasonably quickly – I only had to wait about 30 minutes, but Dominic's was among the very last to come off the plane. We were well over an hour waiting!

I had again arranged to be met by a driver, who took us to our hotel. He kindly helped us in getting things sorted, and as we drove toward Amman filled us in on something of the history of this new city. Up until the 1967 War with Israel, there were only about 1,000 people living here, but afterwards it began to blossom. Another influx of mainly Palestinians arrived during the first Gulf War and a large number of Iraqis arrived during the last Gulf War. Nowadays, almost 80% of the population of Jordan live in Amman. It stretches out in every direction.

We had planned to do a little sightseeing today, but due to our late arrival, and the fact that it is Friday – the Islamic Sabbath – there is not much open, so a welcome siesta followed.

In the evening we had a little walk around the area where we were staying, but there was not much to see other than closed business premises. So after our evening meal, with the prospect of an early start, we retired early. However, my niece, Lucia, decided to wake us with a text that arrived here at midnight, asking quite simply "Where are you?" It was difficult to get back to sleep after being woken!

DAY 5 – 28<sup>th</sup> June 2008

This morning we got up at 5.30 am, had breakfast, and then our driver arrived shortly before 7.00 am to drive us south on the main road linking Amman with the Red Sea port of Aqaba. On the way he explained how Amman had grown. As we moved out into the countryside, or should I say into the desert, he explained that most people were now coming together into small villages focused around either a factory, or water source. The only exception was the Bedouin, who, because they were instrumental in the founding of the Kingdom of Jordan, were still living a nomadic existence, but with many facilities being provided for them free of charge, such as water, education and even petrol. They still live in their tents, even if they have

bought houses and will often just move their tents around their property within a short distance of the house, but never actually living inside it!

About two hours south of Amman we turned off to the west, and headed for the ancient city of Petra, which was to be our destination for the day. Dominic wanted to see the ruins, which have recently been named in the Seven Wonders of the Modern World (since he had already seen the Pyramids, the only surviving Wonder of the Ancient World).

At the entrance we were greeted by our guide, who explained that the area covered by Petra was vast – certainly bigger than the City of London. Thanks to “Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade” many people are familiar with the “Siq” the entrance into the city, and the “Treasury”, which featured heavily at the conclusion of the movie.

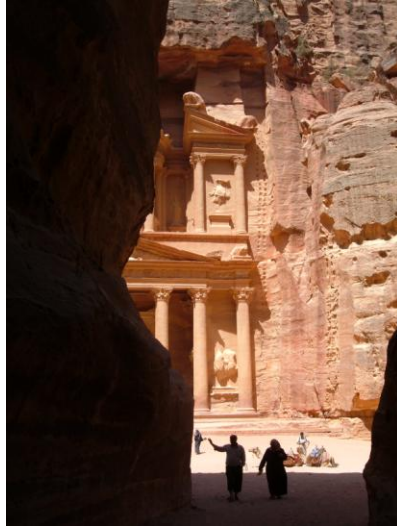
However, what the film did not show was the long walk along the Siq. Although horse-drawn buggies are available (or even horses), we were among the early arrivals at 10.00 am, and the only form of transport left to us was “Shank’s Pony”. So we set off walking down the Siq.

But this is actually the way to do it, in order to appreciate the rock formations, the carvings, water conduits and tombs along the way. Dominic, being a geologist, was in his element, helping to point out various strata and structures to the guide. I can see him coming back to do a longer study in years to come.



As we ventured further down the Siq, the rocks became the more distinctive and well-known rose colour. Then at the end, we had the first glimpse of the Treasury. This was a scene that I had rehearsed in my mind for many years, little knowing that I would actually witness this great sight at first hand.

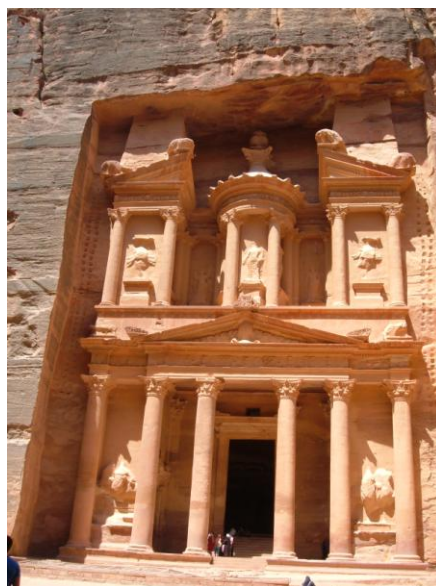
At the last Quiz Night several people were puzzled why I kept bidding for a particular jig-saw. That jig-saw was of the Treasury, and it took me a little longer than usual to complete it, since I had decided to study it in greater detail, so that I would be able to understand the original in greater detail when I saw it.



The term “Treasury” came about since this edifice, modelled on a Pharaoh’s tomb, was believed to contain gold pieces in the carved out container at the top of the monument. Of course it did not, but that did not stop soldiers from using it for their rifle target practice.

Hollywood, of course, is notorious for presenting a seamless link between two totally disconnected scenes. For example, in “The Sound of Music”, Maria is sent on her way to her wedding by the reverend mother, who locks the Abbey gate after her, so that Maria can walk down the aisle. The trouble is that the Abbey gate is about 30 miles away from the aisle of the Church! Similarly, in “Indiana Jones”, the façade of the Treasury is used, but the events inside bear no semblance to what is found there in reality. These are nothing more than tombs and preparation rooms – no “Great Crusader Seal”, no whirling circular saw, bridges or even 800 year old crusaders.

However, the sight of the site is still amazing, and it was easy to spend a long while gazing!



But then, just as I merrily snapped away on the camera, the inevitable – I ran out of memory. Fortunately, there was a café/souvenir shop there, and I was able to purchase (at what must have been a greatly inflated price) and new memory card for the camera.

Petra does not end there! But that is where the guide left us, telling us that, if we wanted to, we could carry on for several more hours or more precisely days, in order to appreciate the whole of Petra.

We carried on deeper into the site, passing various other monuments and tombs. All of these have been carved out of the rock, starting from the top downwards. We walked on past various sellers of the sand-pictures or carvings, which are unique to the area, all the while fending off those who wanted us to hire horses, donkeys or camels to go to the “Monastery” at the end of the present excavations about two miles away.

My sister had threatened me not to ride a donkey. No-one over 8 stone (100 pounds) should ride a donkey, she’d often tell me. But overall, the animals were in good condition, and any over-zealous use of force was only used to stop the animals fighting each other. And just to emphasise the good-will of the animals, there is an animal sanctuary at the beginning of the Siq to care for the older animals.

We walked on for over an hour, ending up at the museum, but decided not to negotiate the climb up a mountainside to the Monastery. Then we headed back. For the most part we took things at a gentle pace, ensuring that we were drinking plenty of water as we went. But there was a temptation to take a buggy back up the Siq at one point, but we resisted, and walked the full length upwards and out of the site.

Our driver was waiting for us in one of the local restaurants. In actual fact, I think he had gone upstairs to lie down on a bed that is prepared for such drivers, knowing that we would be some time. We then headed back to Amman.



On the way back to Amman, we were able to see a common sight in the desert – common for those who are used to it, but rare and unusual for us who do not live near the desert – and that was the so-called “Tasmanian Devils”. These are not animals, as

might be thought. They are in fact mini-tornadoes that whip up the sand, giving the impression of something running along the ground so fast as not to be seen, but creating a cloud of sand in their wake. [The photograph is not wonderful, but the tornado is touching down in the centre and stretches off into the sky!] It was these air currents that caused the turbulence when we landed yesterday!

In all, the day out to Petra had taken almost 10 hours, but was worth every minute.

One fact that I have noticed and would like to share is how friendly and accommodating the Jordanian people are. Everyone has gone out of their way to greet us with a rousing “Welcome to Jordan”. I am impressed with the way that they will do anything and, unlike the Egyptians, not expect a tip (though of course they are still grateful if a tip does come their way).

They also have a great love for their Royal Family, and pictures of King Abdullah and his family can be found everywhere – in shops, hotels, homes and most obviously on large posters throughout the cities and countries. I have been told so often that “he is a good majesty”!

DAY 6 – 29<sup>th</sup> June 2008

Today is the Feast of SS Peter and Paul, so Dominic served Mass for me, and it was an opportunity to pray for the successor of St Peter – Pope Benedict, whom we will be seeing in Sydney very shortly – and also acknowledge the opening of the “Year of St Paul” (which is the reason for the Pilgrimage to Malta and Rome in October – to continue what we started in Greece and Turkey last year “In the Footsteps of St Paul”).

It was also an opportunity to thank God for the safe delivery of Martha Pass – daughter of Jonathan and Louise (nee O’Connor) – who, as many know, has been a matter of great concern. I’m told she is beautiful – but with Seamus as grandfather we have to wonder where she gets it from!

After Mass we had breakfast and then set off to Jerash, in the north of Jordan. This is one of the ten cities that make up the Decapolis, that is referred to in the gospels according to Mark and Matthew – having the ancient name Gerasa.

There are some superb Roman ruins there, and we spent the rest of the morning and early afternoon exploring the site. There is much work already done, but also a lot more to be done. The city has an impressive oval plaza leading into the Cardo (the main street in any Roman city), with temples (later converted to Churches) on either side. The Roman Baths are in a bad way, and it would be nice to see them restored. However, the theatre is well preserved and even the stage area is in a such a good state that they hold concerts there. Another favourite is the re-enactment of various Roman scenes – gladiator fights, chariot races, etc. in the Hippodrome – though there were not many people watching when we passed!

Now we are waiting for our transport to take us to the airport for our night flight to Delhi, our next destination. I’m a little anxious about India, and especially facing

Delhi airport at 4.00 am, when we land. Just discovered, to confuse matters even more, that India is four and a half hours ahead of British time!! We are primarily there for Dominic to see the Taj Mahal, but hopefully we'll have some time to see the sights of Delhi too.