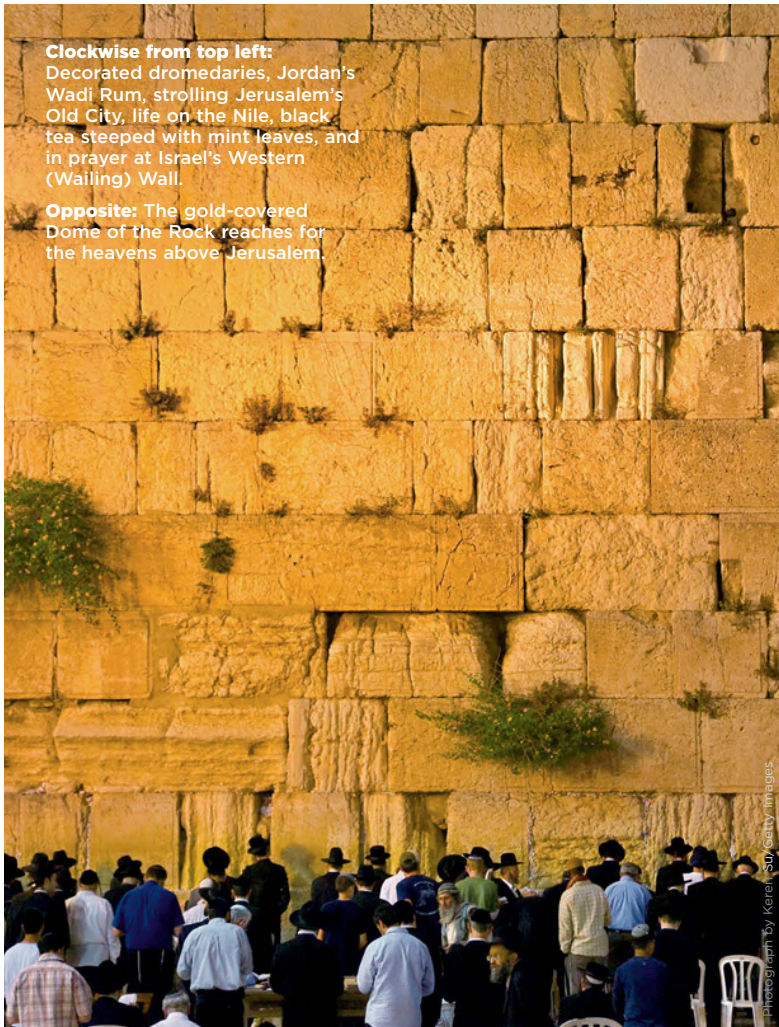




Clockwise from top left:
Decorated dromedaries, Jordan's Wadi Rum, strolling Jerusalem's Old City, life on the Nile, black tea steeped with mint leaves, and in prayer at Israel's Western (Wailing) Wall.

Opposite: The gold-covered Dome of the Rock reaches for the heavens above Jerusalem.



Hassle-Free

HOLY LAND

*Political concerns quelled. Perpetual packing averted. Privileged access secured. **Susan Hanson** finds traveling across the Middle East a breeze on an all-inclusive cruise calling in **Egypt, Jordan, and Israel.***



THE WORLD'S LONGEST RIVER AND THE VERY LIFEBLOOD OF EGYPT, the Nile River appears as an oasis in the Saharan Desert. As early as 5000 BCE, the fertile Nile Valley supported various tribes, creating a huge melting pot that formed into the Upper and Lower Kingdoms. A tenuous unity between these two empires would produce 30 dynasties, the world's earliest literature, and some of the greatest

structures known to humankind, almost all of which lie near the Nile's shores.

And there I stood, peering over my hotel balcony 15 floors above this storied river, watching as the lights of Cairo reflected off the shimmering waters. One of those pinch-yourself moments that only world travel can bring.

It was but the first of many such moments during my two-week Middle East and Mediterranean voyage with Regent Seven Seas Cruises. The journey began with a three-night land package in Cairo and Luxor before traveling to Safaga to join *Seven Seas Voyager*, which would eventually sail on to Barcelona.

If cruising aboard the all-suite, all-balcony, all-inclusive ship weren't enough, this itinerary included calls not only in Egypt, but in Jordan and Israel, as well. Linked by both geography and shared traditions, these Holy Lands gave birth to three of the world's most prominent religions: Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. And while ongoing political discord in the Middle East might cause even the worldliest of traveler to be leery, the cruise made venturing to the region not only wonderfully indulgent, but also worry free.

Islam has dominated Egypt's culture since CE 969, yet the nation has deep ties to Christianity. It is the land where Abraham sojourned during the Canaan famine, and where Jesus was raised after his family fled from Nazareth. The country's capital, Cairo, was once a Christian stronghold, and Coptic Cairo — the city's oldest section — is home to such important churches as the fourth-century Hanging Church. Even Judaism has a place in Coptic Cairo; its Ben Ezra Synagogue is Egypt's oldest.

Today, however, I'd join a small group of trip mates — and newfound friends — to explore remnants of a civilization that thrived millennia before all three religions. After a visit to the Citadel of Salah al-Din and its 19th-century Mohamed Ali Mosque, we headed to the very icons of antiquity: the Pyramids of Giza. Located around 15 miles southwest of Cairo, the Giza necropolis comprises burial monuments dedicated to the pharaohs Khafre, Menkaure, and Khufu.

While looming large in the imagination, the pyramids are, to modern sensibilities, relatively modest in size. The pyramid of Khufu — the oldest and only remaining of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World — originally stood 481 feet high, making it the tallest edifice on Earth for 4,000 years (the ravages of time have shaved some 30 feet from its top). In perspective, that's half the height of the Eiffel Tower. And yet, one can't help but marvel at the mere existence of these mythical structures.

A few hundred yards from Khufu sits that timeless sentinel of the desert, the Great Sphinx; for a negotiated price (around \$10), you can ride a camel down to the limestone creature — not for the faint-hearted, but certainly unforgettable. Yet the memory that lingers most was being asked to pose for pictures with locals, who were genuinely excited to see Americans so soon after the Arab Spring.

Following lunch at the Mena House Oberoi — a former royal lodge that sits in the shadow of the pyramids — our day culminated at the Museum of Egyptian Antiquities. Situated on the now famous Tahrir Square, the repository displays some 120,000 artifacts, including 11 royal mummies and, of course, the treasures of the boy king, Tutankhamun.

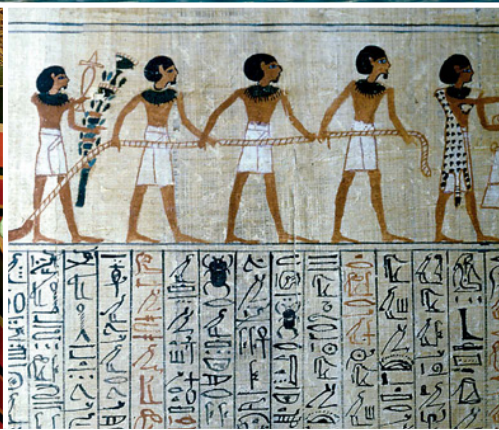
EGYPT'S MOST IMPRESSIVE ANCIENT SITE

AND THE LARGEST TEMPLE EVER BUILT, Karnak lies about an hour from Cairo by plane. The result of centuries of non-stop construction, the complex — dedicated to the creator god Amon-Ra — spans more than 250 acres along the Nile's East Bank. Approaching past a row of ram-headed sphinxes, one is struck by the magnitude of the temple's entrance pylon, yet it is but the first of ten such monumental gateways. Just behind the second stands the Hypostyle Hall with its 134 pillars shaped like papyrus flowers.

You could easily spend days wandering Karnak's countless chapels and shrines, but my companions and I were lured by the sirens of her sister city, Luxor. Built to celebrate the renewal of



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life brought by the Nile's annual flooding, the temple at Luxor is best known for the seated statues of Ramses II that flank its entrance, along with a 75-foot-high obelisk (the twin of which now sits along Paris' Place de la Concorde).

While Luxor is more moderate in scope than Karnak, it offers a greater sense of intimacy. Indeed, one of the benefits of traveling to Egypt now is that we virtually had the site to ourselves. Even more enticing: Sections of the Avenue of the Sphinxes — the one-and-a-half-mile-long, statue-lined processional road that connects the two temples — were opened to the public for the first time this spring.

Our hotel for the evening lay right along the Nile and, waking before dawn, I stood on my balcony to behold the river. After Cairo, the silence here was startling. There wasn't a sound save that of a few roosters, and I watched a lone fisherman rhythmically row along the water as his ancestors had for millennia before him. As the sun rose, the Valley of the Kings — the royal burial grounds that lies just across on the West Bank — turned vibrant shades of orange and red. Another magic-filled day was definitely in store.

Although pharaohs of Egypt's Old Kingdom were buried in Giza, those of the New Kingdom wanted their crypts to be closer to Karnak and their southern roots. To date, 63 elaborately decorated tombs — including that of King Tut — have been discovered in this vast "City of the Dead." We had time to explore three (that of Ramses IV is a must; Tut's requires extra admission) before visiting the oft-overlooked Medinet Habu Temple. Built by Ramses III and second only to Karnak in size and complexity, Medinet Habu's many temples, palaces, and courtyards are intricately carved with battle scenes and images of the divine.

AFTER SUCH AN ACTION-PACKED ITINERARY, THE THREE-HOUR DRIVE TO SAFAGA OFFERED A WELCOMED RESPITE. Though our guide had become a fast friend over the last three days, it was time to bid him farewell and board *Seven Seas Voyager*. Handed a flute of Champagne, I was escorted to my smartly appointed Penthouse suite (given the extra amenities, it's definitely the best value on board), where I was met by my own private butler.

While a Euphoric Detox Wrap at the ship's Canyon Ranch SpaClub was calling, it would have to wait, because the next few days in Jordan were equally active. A predominantly Islamic country, Jordan is at once sacred to Jews for its ties to Abraham and Moses; to Christians, as the place where John baptized Jesus;

and to Muslims, who make pilgrimages to the tombs of Prophet Mohammed's companions.

Today, however, my friends and I would follow the footsteps of another historical figure to cross the Nefud Desert: T.E. Lawrence. During World War I, the British officer — so dashing played by Peter O'Toole in the epic film *Lawrence of Arabia* — led the Arab revolt against the Turks. Lawrence, who lived among the Bedouins, crossed the Wadi Rum on camel to take Aqaba by surprise. We took the sands by more modern means: in tricked-out 4x4 trucks. Wheeling across the dramatic, red sandstone dunes, we stopped to view Nabataean rock art and for a cup of mint tea at an authentic Bedouin camp.

Two full days in Jordan also allowed time to visit Petra, the country's top attraction and one of the New Seven Wonders of the World. Capital of the Nabataean Empire (9 BCE to CE 40), Petra flourished as one of the Middle East's most important commercial centers before an earthquake left it in ruins. The city was lost to the world until 1812, when Swiss traveler Johann Burckhardt revealed its majesty once more. (This year marks not only the 200th anniversary of its re-discovery, but also 50 years since the release of the film.)

Set at the edge of the Wadi Rum, Petra is miraculously carved from the sandstone wall, thus earning the moniker, "The Rose-Red City." One enters through the Siq, a narrow, mile-long canyon accessible only by foot or on horse. After winding your way through this stunning gorge, the Siq suddenly opens to reveal Petra's most jaw-dropping monument: Al Khazneh, or Treasury. Movie fans will recognize this as the location where Harrison Ford finds the Holy Grail in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, and the real-life experience is no less dramatic.

A SHORT CALL IN THE RED SEA RESORT OF SHARM EL SHEIKH — A DIVER'S HAVEN

— followed by a daylong transit of the Suez Canal allowed time to decompress and comprehend all I'd just experienced. There was finally time to get that spa treatment (heavenly), join a Yamuna foot fitness class (perfect for those aching hoofs), and take in a few of the first-rate performances, including a master illusionist from Australia.

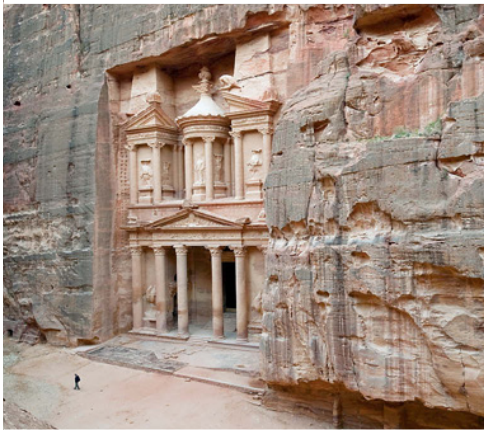
That evening my friends and I discussed our upcoming overnights in Haifa, which we all looked forward to with great anticipation and, confessedly, a bit of trepidation. Israel is famous for its heightened state of security, and more than a few travelers have been left frazzled by its guards' near-mentalistic questioning. Thanks to our ship's staff, however, even going through Israeli security on board was easy and orderly.

Wheeling across the dramatic, red sandstone dunes, we stopped to view Nabataean rock art and for a cup of mint tea at an authentic Bedouin camp.

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Clockwise from top left: Pied pashminas,
ancient Wadi Rum, walk like an Egyptian,
beach life in Sharm El Sheikh, and Petra's
rock star — Al Khazneh (Treasury).



UMAID BHAWAN PALACE, JODHPUR
MAHARAJA SUITE



RAMBAGH PALACE, JAIPUR
GRAND ROYAL SUITE



TAJ LAKE PALACE, UDAIPUR
CHANDRAPRAKASH SUITE

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Once off the ship, I found a special treat waiting for me: My travel advisor had arranged a private car and driver for a daylong exploration of Jerusalem. Sacred to Christians, Jews, and Muslims alike, this holy city inspires and captivates like no other. As my guide and I arrived in Jerusalem, we soaked in the panoramic views from atop the Mount of Olives, then made our way down to the Garden of Gethsemane; it was here where Jesus spent the night before his arrest and crucifixion.

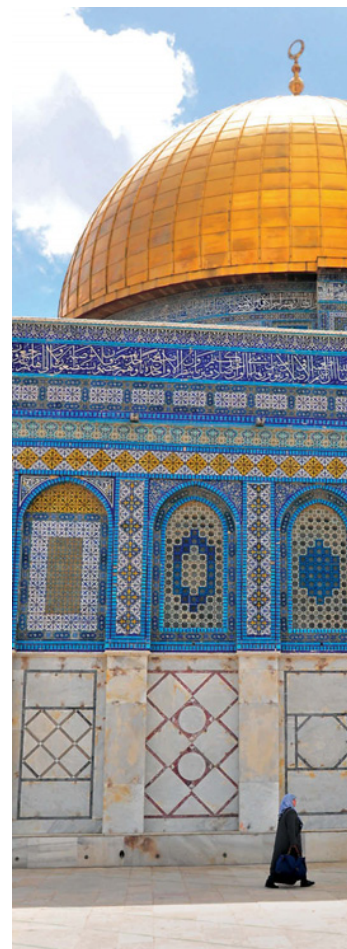
Passing through the Jaffa Gate into the Old City, we made our way along a section of the Via Dolorosa (Way of the Cross) to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the alleged site of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection. All three religions place major importance on the nearby Temple Mount, believed to be where Abraham offered his son Isaac in sacrifice, the Ark of the Covenant was housed, and the prophet Mohammed ascended to heaven. The gold-covered Dome of the Rock commemorates its spiritual significance. (The Mount is closed to non-Muslims on Fridays and during Ramadan.)

Supporting the Mount is the Western Wall, a 1,600-foot stretch of stonewall from King

Herod's Second Temple and one of the most sacred prayer sites in all of Judaism. The third holiest Islamic site, Al Aqsa Mosque, is located here, as well. My guide also led me to new excavations nearby, which include some of the world's oldest aqueducts, and later through a secret doorway in the market that opened into a serene courtyard — complete with a tiny church, rose bushes, and wishing well.

Two must-visits in the New City: the Israel Museum with its Dead Sea Scrolls (the earliest surviving copies of the Bible), and a scaled model of the Second Temple; as well as Yad Vashem, the sobering memorial to those lost in the Holocaust.

Of course, there is so much more to Israel besides Jerusalem. Three full days in Haifa offered the chance to explore Bethlehem — where Jesus was born and a vibrant Arab community still thrives — and the mountaintop fortress of Masada, a symbol of Jewish resistance to Roman occupation and testament to the human spirit. And plenty of other memorable moments lay ahead on Cyprus and Rhodes, in ancient Ephesus and the Knights' city of Valletta. Just pace yourself on the pinching.



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From left: A wider angle of Jerusalem's golden Dome of the Rock, and Rabbi Gutman Locks dispenses tefillin prayer boxes — and wisdom — at the Western Wall.



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MIDDLE EAST Must-Dos

CRUISE

This fall, *Seven Seas Voyager* returns to the Middle East, sailing 14 nights from Istanbul to Safaga; afterwards, **Regent Seven Seas Cruises** treats guests to a three-day land program in Luxor and Cairo. Spend more time with the ancients during calls in Alexandria and Port Said, and tour Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, and sun-soaked Eilat during overnights in Israel. Virtuoso guests enjoy a private, full-day event in Petra with Voyager Club. *Departs October 31, 2012. Deluxe suite fares from \$11,649.* Or, explore Egypt's antiquities during a three-day adventure before meeting the ship in Safaga for a two-week sailing to Civitavecchia for Rome. Voyager Club provides exclusive access to Turkey's recently excavated Terrace Houses in Ephesus. *Departs May 4, 2013. Deluxe suite fares from \$10,299.*

Oceania Cruises visits the area during a 21-day journey to Civitavecchia (Rome), beginning in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. A casual, close-knit ambiance on board *Nautica* creates the feel of a private club calling in ports across the Red Sea. An overnight in Luxor allows time to catch the Karnak light and sound show, while Santorini, Taormina, and Sorrento add classic Mediterranean flavor. *Departs April 29, 2013. Ocean-view fares from \$6,308.*

More adventurous souls can join **Zegrahm Expeditions** at the UNESCO World Heritage-designated ruins of Baalbek and Byblos in Lebanon — not to mention Giza, Luxor, and Petra, to go behind the ancient scenes. Snorkel in Egypt's crystal-clear Ras Mohammed Marine Park, follow T.E. Lawrence's footsteps in Wadi Rum, and relax in sophisticated comfort aboard the expedition ship, *Clipper Odyssey*. *Departs October 15, 2012. From \$12,780.*

SEE

Family-run **Travex** has been creating custom journeys in Israel almost since the country's inception. Tailor-made days in Jerusalem take guests from the Mount of Olives to the renovated Jewish Quarter to the Israel Museum for a glimpse of the Dead Sea Scrolls. *Full-day tours from \$490 (includes round-trip transfers from port).* An overnight in the ancient city also offers the chance to visit Nazareth, behold the Mount of Beatitudes, and gaze across the Sea of Galilee. Expect a white-glove touch throughout. *From \$1,186 (includes round-trip transfers from port and 4-star accommodations in Jerusalem).* Your Virtuoso travel advisor can work with Travex to create customized shore excursions and extended vacations across Israel. **VT**