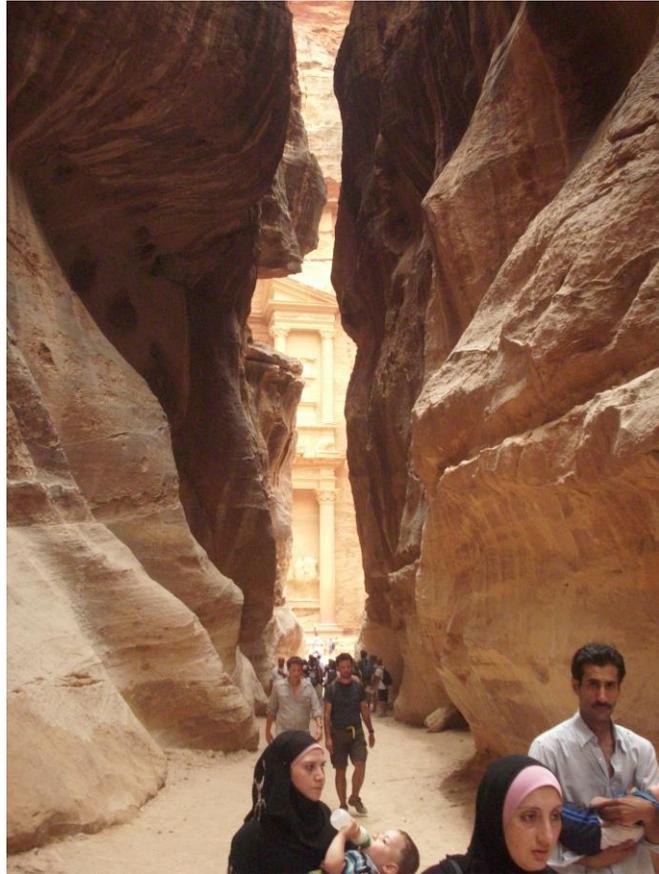


“Seaing” Red

The Red Sea attractions are largely shared by three countries: Jordan, Israel and Egypt. Many tourists cross between the three to visit not only the Red Sea but also for the numerous side trips. One can immediately notice the difference between the three countries with Israel being the most affluent, but many visitors enjoy the historical sights of Jordan or the natural beauty of the Egyptian Red Sea.

The main Red Sea city in Jordan is Aqaba. Although there is an interesting castle and museum in Aqaba, most people visit to enjoy the beaches and the Gulf of Aqaba. There are some city beaches in the city center, but most tourists visit the nicer beaches tied to resorts a few miles south of the city. One can see Eliat, Israel and Taba, Egypt from Aqaba. There is sometimes tension between the three as exemplified by a missile that was launched from Egypt for Israel but instead hitting a taxi in Aqaba, killing the driver, two days before I arrived in Aqaba.

Many tourists make just a short stop in Aqaba and then head to Petra. Petra is a city made by the Nabataeans in the Third Century BC and includes a variety of buildings built into sandstone. The main attraction is the Treasury at the end of the Siq which is a small pathway between massive rocks split apart by tectonic activity. The pathway is nearly one mile long and has several inscriptions such as a camel caravan as well as intricate rock formations. From this narrow opening, one can see the Treasury which is actually a tomb. Some people thought an Egyptian pharaoh had stored his treasure in the urn near the top of the complex which explains the gunshot holes.



Visitors to Petra can buy one, two or three day passes and despite how famous the Treasury is there are many other sites to keep people busy for three days. The Street of Facades is a series of forty caves that visitors can explore. In this area is the Roman Theater as well as the High Place of Sacrifice. Opposite the theater are the Royal Tombs which have particularly good inscriptions. Continuing away from the Treasury, the Colonnade has

several temples and a small museum. Continuing on is a fairly demanding trek to the Monastery which was originally built as a tomb but was used as a monastery in the Byzantine times.

While in Wadi Musa, which is the city where people stay while visiting Petra, one can make arrangements for Wadi Rum. This desert was made famous by *Lawrence of Arabia* which depicts the Brit TE Lawrence's attempt to help the Arab revolt versus the Ottomans in World War I. Lawrence's role was exaggerated as the Arabs revolted fairly independently and there is not much left related to Lawrence just a wall of the ruins of a house where Lawrence lived. What is of more interest is the actual desert. There are several rock formations such as the Seven Pillars of Wisdom and caves with inscriptions. But highlights include the sunrise and sunset and camping out under the stars. The camp meal was a real feast that included food cooked in a large barbecue.

The main city on the Israeli side is Eliat. One notices that it is more affluent here, there is more security and it is more hedonistic. After a three hour stay at the border as I was questioned about my time in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq, I made it across. Eliat is more of a resort town which explains why it is expensive but Israel in general is more expensive than its neighbors. Security is present wherever there is any real crowd so simply going into McDonald's will require guards going through personal belongings before entering. Also, on the beach the swimming suits are shorter and there is alcohol being consumed as well which differs from Israel's neighbors.

A rather long day trip from Eliat is Masada where the First Jewish Revolt occurred in 66



AD and thus is important to the Jewish people. Masada is a fortress that the Zealots fled to and was the place of final resistance to the Romans. The nearly 1,000 people there chose to kill themselves rather than fight. A black line shows the areas that are original (below the line) and those that are recreated (above the line). Visitors can hike to the complex, but since this is in the desert there is a cable car that at times is mandatory to take as opposed to walking due to the heat.

Taba in Sinai is the border town for Egypt and is the gateway to Dahab and Sharm el-Sheikh. Dahab is a nice little town where one can do some diving and look at the fishes of the Red Sea. There are numerous restaurants, tourist shops and beaches. The Sinai part of Egypt had some tension as Americans and Israelis were advised not to go. There were comments made and also just general annoying tourist pestering but nothing violent. The Bedouins who live here do

not feel connected to Egypt and although the Mubarak government had made concessions and gave them representation in the government, the tension remained.

Also in the area is Mt. Sinai with the big debate on whether to reach the summit at sunrise or sunset. Sunrise means a departure at two in the morning when it is actually quite cool



which is better than doing it in the midday heat. More people choose the sunrise hike which makes for difficulty finding a spot when the sun actually does rise over Sinai. There are a lot of people on the path to the mountain top as well as many locals attempting to sell camel rides. There are a handful of shops that sell overpriced water, but it is of more interest to take a quick break at these shops to see the stream of people with their flashlights heading up the

mountain in the dark. Reaching the top with the hoards of people, many contemplate the fact that this is where Moses received the Ten Commandments.

The way down is obviously easier and highlighted by St. Katherine's Monastery. The monastery is functional and includes a hotel to stay overnight. There is also a restaurant here, frequented by the people on organized tours. The Sacred Sacristy within the grounds has several important religious artifacts. Nearby a golden calf is cut into the mountain stone to signify the false idol the non-believers worshipped.

Many go to the Red Sea for relaxation and the surrounding natural beauty. Although this is a good idea, there are several other slightly more strenuous activities. Climbing Masada and especially Sinai are difficult, but anyone remotely interested in history should visit. There are also several difficult hikes in Petra but a minimum one day visit is needed. Slightly more relaxing is Wadi Musa and the Israeli and Jordanian beaches. So, whether on the beach or climbing mountains, the Red Sea area is varied enough that most visitors will find their niche.