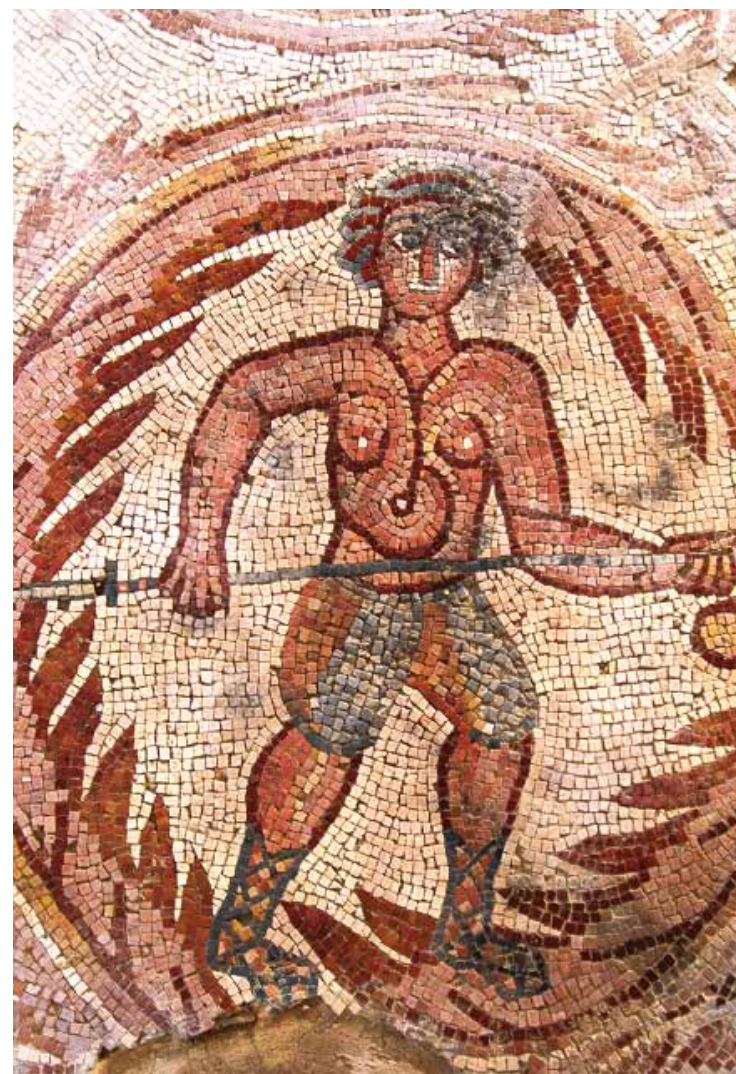


Beauty and the East

Cleopatra wasn't the only one to love Arabia's mud treatments. **Josephine Davies** dives in to Jordan's historic spa culture

Mind the gap: the approach to Petra's ancient Treasury. Opposite, clockwise from top left, Dead Sea salt formations; Mount Nebo church; 6th-century mosaic at the Church of St George, Madaba

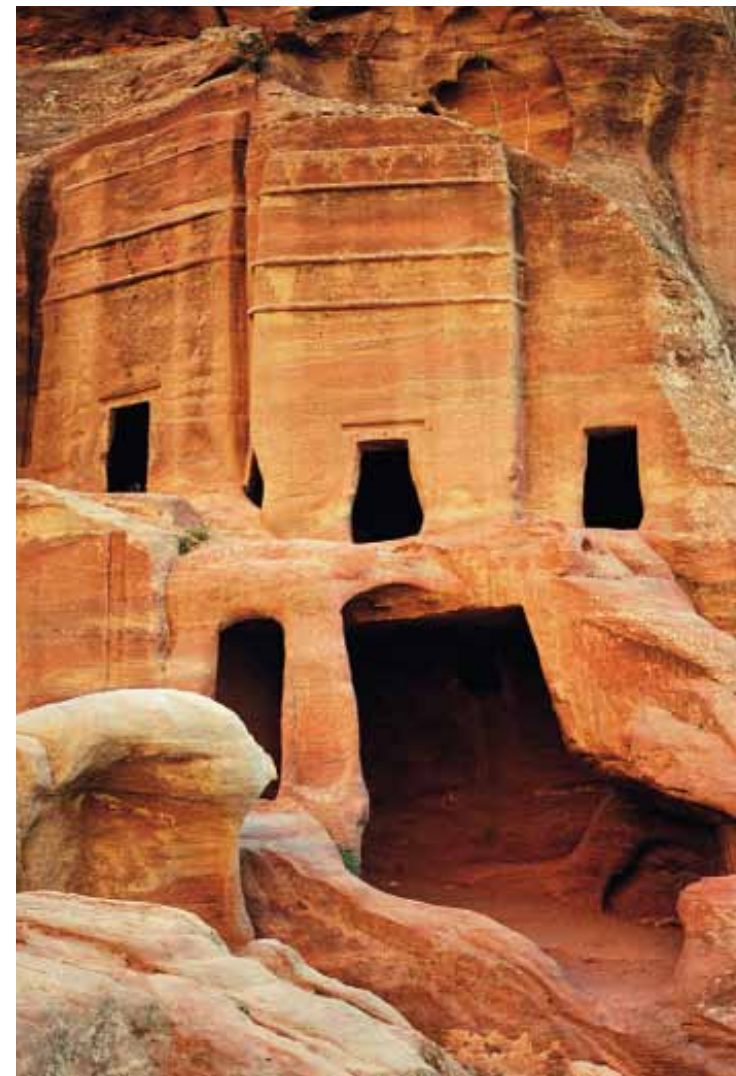


The sun was slowly drying the mud smeared on my body, turning it from a shade of dark charcoal to an unflattering corpse-grey. As I watched, I started to wonder whether the Dead Sea spa ritual wasn't just a joke devised by locals to make fools of gullible tourists. I had already learned the hard way that shaving your legs before taking a dip in the world's saltiest sea is a true test of one's pain threshold. Still, no pain no gain – once the salt had stopped stinging and the ugly mud had been rinsed away, my skin could have been cashmere. No wonder Cleopatra was a fan.

Dazed by one too many office deadlines, my mother and I had hit on Jordan for an easy-exotic long weekend of sunshine and spa treats, with a side order of ancient sites. Five hours after leaving London's gloomy skies, we were on the airport tarmac in Amman, the hot desert breeze tugging our sleeves like an impatient child.

We were headed for Ma'In, a 40-minute drive from Jordan's glassy modern capital, and another world entirely. As the scruffy outskirts shrank behind a plume of red dust, a sun-baked landscape opened up before us – a procession of scenes from another age: elderly men with faces of carved teak by the roadside, stroking beards of biblical proportions; sheep bleating on hillsides; and faded carpets, strung high, sheltering stacks of buxom watermelons, to be sliced open for thirsty travellers. Abdul-azeez, our driver, rattled off the local sights. 'That hill over there, that's where Moses died, then just south is where John the Baptist was beheaded – and down the road, you'll see a strange-looking column that's said to be Lot's wife, turned to a pillar of salt.'

Toss a pebble in Jordan and chances are it'll hit some astonishing age-old ruin or holy site. The whole country is a layer-cake of history: Greek, Nabatean, Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman ruins lie stacked atop one another, in an archaeologist's dream. These >



Above, left to right, ready salted: cocktail hour in the Dead Sea – the saline keeps you afloat; steam clean in the spa pool at Evason Ma'in; ancient dwellings carved into Petra's pink rockface; Dead Sea at dusk

would have to wait though – we were in Jordan first and foremost for its more sybaritic splendours. As the car wound through a lunar landscape of crumpled canyons, the Dead Sea flashed a tantalising glimpse of sparkly cobalt, far below the hairpin bends.

At around 400m below sea level, it's the lowest spot in the world: ears pop on the descent; water bottles crinkle with the changing pressure. A uniquely muggy microclimate keeps it around 10°C toastier than the rest of the country, so when Amman is cold and rainy, residents like to pop down for warm weekends by the sea.

Wedge dramatically in a steep-sided *wadi*, or dry river bed, a few kilometres inland from the sea itself, the Evason Ma'in is the latest spa retreat to open its rustic-luxe doors in Jordan. But spas are nothing new here – everyone from King Herod to Cleopatra has had a wallow in the Dead Sea's balmy brine, a therapeutic cocktail of minerals and salts believed to cure a compendium of ailments (bronchitis, eczema...). The Evason has an extra trick up its sleeve: gushing from rocks all around the resort are hot springs, which thunder vertically in steaming waterfalls. In pools below, guests bob about in a diversity of attire, among them bikini-clad tourists and Arab ladies cloaked in head-to-toe costumes like wetsuits.

'Caution: hot water', reads a sign planted in one of the shallow streams that flow through the valley. It's a slight understatement: wade in and you'll squeal at the scalding temperatures. The waterfalls are perfect though, and I star in my very own TV shampoo advert as the mineral-rich water pounds my shoulders and clouds of butterflies scatter to dodge the rainbow arcs of spray.

The spa at the Evason is a honey-hued cluster of domed buildings tucked beneath the cliffs. Robed guests pad about in slippers, disappearing into hushed rooms. My treatment has me scrubbed

with Dead Sea salt; my mother, meanwhile, gets pummelled with olive oil. Afterwards, over cups of ginger tea, she says she'd happily sell a kidney for another hour's treatment, and I agree.

For the real deal, though, it's down to the Dead Sea itself. We find two loungers laid out for us on an empty stretch of beach where pebbles glint like Swarovski crystals, encrusted with salt. You may have heard stories about the water here: six times saltier than normal seawater, it makes you fantastically, comically buoyant. Launching into the bay, we bob up like champagne corks, flailing on the surface, dissolving into giggles. A current tugs us along the beach – usually I'd panic, but it would be quite a feat to drown here, since sinking isn't an option, and the salinity means the Dead Sea is just that. Dead. Nothing can survive – no sharks, no jellyfish – just some resilient algae. You do feel a little nervous, though, as the sea floor drops away, fading from pale blue to deep navy like a Dulux paint chart.

In this contented coma, you could easily spend your whole stay. But that would be to miss some of Jordan's biggest showstoppers. We begin next day with a map we find in the Greek Orthodox Church of St George, in Madaba, an easy-going town a short drive from Ma'in. It's an exquisite 6th-century mosaic depicting the Middle East with all the main biblical sights right down to the dates hanging from the palms. 'That fish has the same expression you had when you jumped in the Dead Sea,' whispers my mother, pointing to a miserable-looking creature in the tiles, swimming desperately up the River Jordan away from the salty waters.

There are more startlingly beautiful mosaics at nearby Mount Nebo, looking as fresh and vivid as if they'd been laid yesterday: emerald peacocks, snarling lions and wild boar gaze up from ancient floors. Believed to be the spot where Moses saw the Promised Land, Mount Nebo is now home to a monastery, and the windswept summit draws droves of pilgrims each year. Today, though, it is quiet, the silence broken only by the occasional rustle of olive trees and the chatter of finches.

No such luck at Petra, Jordan's star attraction, three hours' drive through a dusty desert. The Nabateans – ancient Arabian nomads – carved this spectacular city from pink desert sandstone in 600BC, and although the queue for tickets is garish with Day-Glo-clad American teenagers, the site has lost none of its wow factor.

Even the approach – along the sinuous, shadowy *siq*, a deep fissure in the earth's crust formed by an ancient earthquake – is dramatic enough to silence the Day-Glo brigade. Suddenly, ahead, appears a slice of the iconic Treasury, a jigsaw piece framed by towering walls that open up to reveal the whole picture, every bit as stupefying as it looked in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (filmed

here in 1988). The rocks all around are riddled with tombs and temples, carved from stone striated with exquisite rainbow hues. Just 20 per cent of Petra has been excavated, yet the site is vast and sprawling, and by the time Faris, our driver for the day, scoops us into his Jeep, we're as limp as lettuce.

Faris means 'horseman' in Arabic, and he is, indeed, our knight in shining armour. Driving up to a hill overlooking the ruins, he spreads a blanket under a pistachio tree and produces a picnic hamper stuffed with dates, salads, cold meats and candied oranges that squirt nectar as sugary as the Dead Sea is salty. Like our long weekend in Jordan, it's a stupor-inducing, irresistible spread. ■

travel brief

GO PACKAGED

Abercrombie & Kent (0845 618 2213, www.abercrombiekent.co.uk) has four nights' B&B at the Evason Ma'in from £1,060pp, including flights from Heathrow and transfers. Or try **On the Go Tours Jordan** (020 7371 1113, www.onthegotours.com) or **Discover Jordan** (0844 880 1013, www.discoverjordan.co.uk).

GO INDEPENDENT

Bmi (www.flybmi.com) flies from Heathrow to Amman from £372 return; **Royal Jordanian** (08719 112112, www.rj.com) flies from Heathrow from £419.

WHERE TO STAY

Evason Ma'in (00 962 5324 5500, www.sixsenses.com/evason-ma-in) has doubles from £250, B&B, and does a fine line in understated rustic-chic: expect lots of stone, wood and natural fabrics. The spa fuses Far East with Middle East and boasts natural hot springs for therapeutic dips; treatments start from

£34 for a Dead Sea salt body polish. Another good spa retreat is **The Kempinski Hotel Ishtar** (00 962 5356 8888, www.kempinski-deadsea.com), a lavish pile right on the Dead Sea with infinity pools and fountains galore, sleek rooms and a vast spa; doubles from £153, room only. Or try the **Mövenpick Resort & Spa** (00 962 5356 1111, www.movenpick-deadsea.com), another sprawling pampering retreat built in the style of a Jordanian village; doubles from £150, B&B. Jordan is a small country, so you can make day trips to most sights.

WHEN TO GO

The best times to visit are spring and autumn, when temperatures aren't too extreme. In the summer months they can reach the high 30s, while winters can be surprisingly cool.

FURTHER INFORMATION

See www.visitjordan.com.

