

Welcome to the Middle East

The Middle East is one of history's grand epics – a cradle of civilisations and a beautiful, complicated land that's home to some of the most hospitable people on the planet.

History Writ Large

In the Middle East, history is not something you read about in books. Here, it's a story written on the stones that litter the region, from the flagstones of old Roman roads to the building blocks of ancient Egypt, and the delicately carved tombs and temples from Petra to Baalbek. This is where humankind first built cities and learned to write, and it was from here that Judaism, Christianity and Islam all arose. Wherever you find yourself, the past is always present because here, perhaps more than anywhere else on earth, history is the heart and soul of the land.

Home of Hospitality

At some point on your visit to the Middle East, you'll be sitting in a coffeehouse or looking lost in a labyrinth of narrow lanes when someone will strike up a conversation and, within minutes, invite you home to meet their family and share a meal. Or someone will simply approach and say with unmistakable warmth, 'Welcome'. These spontaneous, disarming and utterly genuine words of welcome can occur anywhere. And when they do, they can suddenly (and forever) change the way you see the Middle East.

Cities

The Middle East's cities read like a roll-call of historical heavyweights: Jerusalem, Damascus, Beirut, Cairo, Istanbul, Erbil, Esfahan. Aside from ranking among the oldest continuously inhabited cities on earth, these ancient-modern metropolises are places to take the pulse of a region. It is in the region's cities, too, that you find the stirring, aspirational architecture that so distinguishes the three great monotheistic faiths. There they sit alongside the more secular charms of bazaars and coffeehouses that seem to embody all the mystery and storytelling magic of a land that gave us *The Thousand and One Nights*.

Wilderness

Beyond city limits, the Middle East is a land of mighty rivers (the Nile, Euphrates), even mightier deserts (the Sahara and peerless Wadi Rum) and green landscapes of exceptional beauty. Exploring these wilderness areas – from snowcapped summits in Turkey, Iran and Lebanon to the kaleidoscopic waters of the Red Sea – lies at the heart of the region's appeal. The message is simple: Forget the clichés that masquerade as Middle Eastern truth – a visit here is one of the most varied and soulful travel experiences on earth.



Why I Love the Middle East

By Anthony Ham, Writer

It was in Damascus that I first fell for the Middle East. Here was a city of storytellers, of warm and welcoming people, of history brought alive at every turn. Ten years later (a decade in which I had marvelled at the peerless beauty of Esfahan and struck out into the Sahara at Siwa, among many Middle Eastern journeys), I returned to Damascus and fell in love all over again. War may since have engulfed the country, but Damascus, and the Middle East, has seen it all before – nowhere else on earth is life lived with such an awareness of history.

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