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Amman to Cairo

This journey represents a shorter version of the old İstanbul-to-Cairo traveller favourite (no longer possible because of the war in Syria) and includes some of the Middle East’s premier attractions.

Your journey starts in Amman, a cosmopolitan city with Roman ruins and brilliant restaurants. After visit to the Dead Sea (an easy day trip from the capital), detour to Jerusalem, the Middle East’s spiritual heart. Returning to Jordan, spend some time exploring fabulous Petra, the Middle East’s most beguiling ancient city. Further south, Petra’s rival to the title of Jordan’s most spectacular site is Wadi Rum, a soulful red-hued desert landscape that rewards those who spend a couple of days exploring. From here, leave Jordan behind and cross the Red Sea at Aqaba to Nuweiba in Egypt. Where you go from here depends on the prevailing security situation, with much of the Sinai Peninsula considered risky at the time of research. Assuming all is well, continue on from Nuweiba to Dahab, for Red Sea snorkelling and an excursion to catch sunrise from atop Mt Sinai. From Dahab (or from Nuweiba if security is uncertain) make for clamorous, attraction-rich Cairo.
Above: Bronze sculpture at Memorial Viewpoint (p316), Mt Nebo, Jordan

Left: Grotto of the Nativity (p261), Bethlehem, Israel & the Palestinian Territories
Welcome to the Middle Eastern heartland for a trip through the best that Jordan and Israel and the Palestinian Territories have to offer. Although distances can be small, there's a lot to pack in. Most of this trip is best accomplished using public transport.

**Amman** may lack the cachet of other Middle Eastern cities, but most travellers end up staying longer than planned. From here, it’s easy to make side trips to many of Jordan’s must-see destinations; the echoes of Moses at **Mt Nebo** and the mosaics of **Madaba** deserve your time. When you’re ready to move on, head to **Jerash**, a quiet yet rewarding ancient site with a wonderful colonnaded way running through its heart. Travelling south, **Bethany-Beyond-the-Jordan**, the place where Christ was baptised, resonates strongly with pilgrims, while floating in the buoyant waters of the **Dead Sea** is a signature Middle Eastern experience.

Across the Jordan River, roiling **Jerusalem** is the starting point of so much Middle Eastern history. From Jerusalem, make for the biblical towns of **Bethlehem** and **Jericho**. In Israel’s north, timeless **Akko** and the world-class ruins of **Caesarea** are worth as much time as you can give them. On your way back, don’t miss **Tel Aviv**, a lively place to let your hair down and discover the hedonistic side of Israeli life. Its antithesis, the **Negev desert**, is a wilderness area that you simply don’t expect to find in this ever-crowded corner of the earth.

Crossing back into Jordan, the Crusader castle of **Karak** and the spectacular scenery of **Dana Biosphere Reserve** shouldn’t be missed, while **Petra** is an astonishing place, where reality outstrips even the most lofty expectations. If time allows, spend at least a couple of days here, so you can savour the main tombs as well as visit the site’s more outlying areas. The same applies to **Wadi Rum** – you could get a taste of this soulful place in a day, but you’ll gain a deeper understanding of its gravitas if you sleep out under the stars for at least one night. The laid-back Red Sea port of **Aqaba**, with world-class diving and snorkelling, provides the perfect place to rest at journey’s end.
From marvellous Istanbul to the fascinating cities of central Iran, this itinerary takes you from the Middle East’s most Western-oriented corner to its least. Neither, however, conforms to stereotypes and the journey between the two is like traversing the region’s complicated soul. Allow two weeks for each country.

İstanbul is at once a destination in its own right and the starting point of so many Turkish journeys. After a few days, make for Ankara, the country’s underrated capital and then take a detour to conservative but welcoming Konya, the spiritual home of the Sufis. Perhaps returning via Ankara, make for the otherworldly landscapes of Cappadocia that seem to have sprung from a wonderfully childlike imagination. Linger as long as you can here – it’s a landscape that really gets under your skin the longer you stay. When you can finally tear yourself away, begin the long journey east to the brooding statues of Nemrut Dağı, surely one of Turkey’s most thought-provoking sights. By the time you reach Erzurum, you’ll have left the last remnants of tourist Turkey, and your reward in this eastern city is a fine open-air gallery of Seljuk and Mongol-era monuments. Consider climbing Mt Ararat (although you need to plan well in advance to do so), before crossing the border into Iran.

Your first stop in Iran should be Tabriz, not least because its bazaar is one of the finest, most evocative of all Middle Eastern markets. Spend a day or two in Tehran, itself home to an overwhelming market as well as fine museums. But after a couple of days, stop resisting the temptation and head on to Esfahan, one of the Middle East’s most beautiful, most bejewelled cities (at least in the centre), with its utterly exquisite gardens, arched bridges and tiled mosques. Shiraz is a cultured, appealing city, not to mention the gateway to Persepolis, that towering monument to all that was good about Ancient Persia. Continue to Yazd and check into an atmospheric traditional hotel in the old town. Spend two days exploring the old city, visit the Zoroastrian Towers of Silence and perhaps take a trek into the desert. Finish up in Kerman, from where you can take a tour to the remarkable ‘sand castles’ of the Kaluts.
There's so much to see in Egypt that it deserves its own itinerary. Count on a week for Cairo and Alexandria, a week for the Western Oases, and another week for the country's south.

So many Egyptian journeys revolve around Cairo, and you'll return here again and again. Apart from being the Middle East's largest and most clamorous metropolis, Cairo is also home to the iconic Pyramids of Giza, the Egyptian Museum and a wonderful coffeehouse culture. After Cairo, head north to Alexandria, Egypt's sophisticated and quintessentially Mediterranean city. It feels like nowhere else in the country, and a combination of terrific museums and great food gives you further reason to visit. A really long journey west is worth it for your first sight of Siwa, one of the Sahara's great oasis outposts and home to an ancient temple in the sands. It's the sort of place where you can stand on the outskirts of the village, just as Alexander the Great did, and contemplate eternity. Dusty desert trails lead to the Bahariya Oasis; you'll need to rent a private 4WD to reach Bahariya, but why not make it part of a deep desert expedition from Bahariya into the White and Black Deserts.

It's back to Cairo to enjoy the pleasures of civilisation for a day or two before jumping on a train south to Aswan, one of Africa's loveliest riverside spots. There's a monastery and museum to anchor your explorations of the city, but its real charm is its proximity to the Nile. Take the detour south into Nubia to Abu Simbel, one of Egypt's most extraordinary temples, then from Aswan sail slowly up the Nile aboard a felucca, savouring the slow rhythms of life along this, the world's longest river, all the way to Luxor, home to the richest collection of Pharaonic sites in the country. Here you'll find so much of what drew you to Egypt in the first place, including the Temples of Karnak, the Valley of the Kings and the Valley of the Queens.
Above: Tyre (p385), Lebanon
Left: Armenian church, Van, Turkey
The Kurdish homeland spans Turkey, Syria, Iran and Iraq, although Syria and Iraq are off limits, and expressions of Kurdish identity are rare in Iran. Fortunately, journeying through Turkey’s east and southeast provides numerous opportunities for experiencing Kurdish culture. Count on three weeks, although you could do it in two. Begin in Ankara, where you’ll find a splendid museum and a fine citadel. On your way southeast into the Kurdish heartland, stop in Cappadocia and Nemrut Dağı before exploring the rarely visited but always fascinating cities of Gaziantep and Şanlıurfa. Nearby Mardin combines a beautiful setting with equally beautiful architecture and a fascinating cultural mix. By the time you reach Diyarbakir, with its intriguing architecture, you’re deep in Kurdish territory. Head for Doğubayazıt, one of eastern Turkey’s most extraordinary sights, with a legendary castle and stunning views of Mt Ararat; the mountain could not be climbed at time of research, although most travellers content themselves with not-so-distant views from the town anyway. Further south, Van is home to the lovely Armenian church on Akdamar Island.

For this Mediterranean sojourn, count on a week to 10 days in Lebanon and two weeks in Turkey.

Begin in Beirut, a glamorous metropolis, the Middle East in complicated microcosm and filled with Mediterranean joie de vivre. If it’s safe, head south to the Phoenician heartland – Saida, the Temple of Echmoun and Tyre. Next, head north to the pretty fishing port of Byblos and then finish up with some hiking through the Qadisha Valley, finally putting on your skis at the Cedars.

From Beirut, fly to Istanbul for a few days in that most glorious of cities. Three days should give you a taste before you move on to visit Gallipoli, with its poignant echoes of WWI, and Troy, where altogether more ancient battles took place. Work your way around the coast, pausing at the mighty ruins of Ephesus, which rank among the Middle East’s most imposing, and lingering in the delightful Mediterranean villages of Kaş or Olympos where you’ll wonder why life can’t always be like this.
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OUR READERS

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Steve Waters

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Index

ABBREVIATIONS

E  Egypt
In  Iran
Iq  Iraq
IPT  Israel & the Palestinian Territories
J  Jordan
L  Lebanon
S  Syria
T  Turkey

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We share the best on our Facebook page every week!
Map Legend

Sights
- Beach
- Bird Sanctuary
- Buddhist
- Castle/Palace
- Christian
- Confucian
- Hindu
- Jain
- Jewish
- Monument
- Museum/Gallery/Historic Building
- Ruin
- Shinto
- Sikh
- Taoist
- Winery/Vineyard
- Zoo/Wildlife Sanctuary
- Other Sight

Activities, Courses & Tours
- Bodysurfing
- Diving
- Canoeing/Kayaking
- Course/Tour
- Sento Hot Baths/Onsen
- Skiing
- Snorkelling
- Surfing
- Swimming/Pool
- Walking
- Windsurfing
- Other Activity

Sleeping
- Sleeping
- Camping
- Hut/Shelter

Eating
- Eating

Drinking & Nightlife
- Drinking & Nightlife
- Cafe

Entertainment
- Entertainment

Shopping
- Shopping

Information
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- Embassy/Consulate
- Hospital/Medical
- Internet
- Police
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- Telephone
- Toilet
- Tourist Information
- Other Information

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- Gate
- Hut/Shelter
- Lighthouse
- Lookout
- Mountain/Volcano
- Oasis
- Park
- Pass
- Picnic Area
- Waterfall

Population
- Capital (National)
- Capital (State/Province)
- City/Large Town
- Town/Village

Transport
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- Border crossing
- Bus
- Cable car/Funicular
- Cycling
- Ferry
- Metro station
- Monorail
- Parking
- Petrol station
- Subway station
- Taxi
- Train station/Railway
- Tram
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- Other Transport

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- Freeway
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- Tertiary
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- Road under construction
- Plaza/Mall
- Steps
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- Walking Tour
- Walking Tour detour
- Path/Walking Trail

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- State/Province
- Disputed
- Regional/Suburb
- Marine Park
- Cliff
- Wall

Hydrography
- River, Creek
- Intermittent River
- Canal
- Water
- Dry/Salt/Intermittent Lake
- Reef

Areas
- Airport/Runway
- Beach/Desert
- Cemetery (Christian)
- Cemetery (Other)
- Glacier
- Mudflat
- Park/Forest
- Sight (Building)
- Sportsground
- Swamp/Mangrove

Note: Not all symbols displayed above appear on the maps in this book
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**Israel & the Palestinian Territories**  
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OUR STORY

A beat-up old car, a few dollars in the pocket and a sense of adventure. In 1972 that’s all Tony and Maureen Wheeler needed for the trip of a lifetime – across Europe and Asia overland to Australia. It took several months, and at the end – broke but inspired – they sat at their kitchen table writing and stapling together their first travel guide, Across Asia on the Cheap. Within a week they’d sold 1500 copies. Lonely Planet was born.

Today, Lonely Planet has offices in Franklin, London, Melbourne, Oakland, Dublin, Beijing and Delhi, with more than 600 staff and writers. We share Tony’s belief that ‘a great guidebook should do three things: inform, educate and amuse’.

OUR WRITERS

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Orlando Crowcroft

Israel & the Palestinian Territories

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Mark Elliott

Iran

Mark had already lived and worked on five continents when, in the pre-Internet dark ages, he started writing travel guides. He has since authored (or co-authored) around 60 books including dozens for Lonely Planet. He also acts as a travel consultant, occasional tour leader, video presenter, speaker, interviewer and blues harmonicist.

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