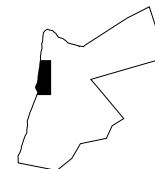


Dead Sea Highway



The Dead Sea – known locally as Al-Bahr al-Mayit or Bahr Lut (Sea of Lot) – is one of the world's most extreme locations. About 65km long, with waters six times saltier than the ocean, the depression lies sweltering and sticky at the lowest point on earth. As you descend from the central Jordanian plateau into the Rift Valley the air gets warmer, thicker and muggier. The scenery turns barren brown and a spectacular blue lake opens up before your eyes.

Most people come to the Dead Sea to float in the weirdly buoyant waters or to pamper themselves in a seashore spa, but a trip here doesn't necessarily have to end with a been-there-done-that dip in the salty sea. The wonderful Wadi Mujib Nature Reserve in particular offers great scope for some wet and wild adventure, from hiking and ibex-spotting to swimming and waterfall rappelling.

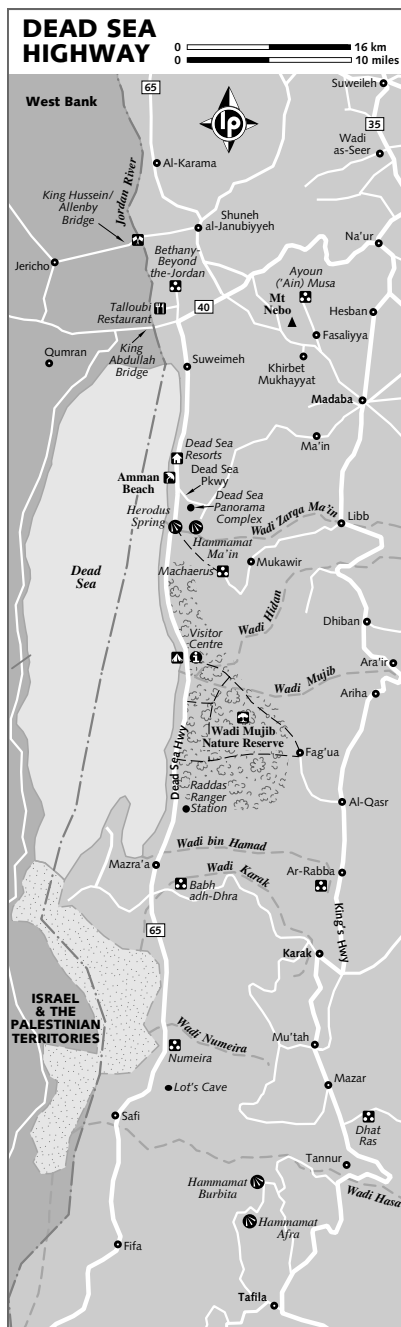
There's also plenty of archaeological interest. The site of Bethany-Beyond-the-Jordan, where Jesus was baptised by John, is one of the most remarkable historical discoveries of recent years. Further south, Lot's Cave points the way to the intriguing possible locations of those quintessential biblical bad boys, Sodom and Gomorrah.

The Dead Sea Highway is best explored with a car. Public transport is very limited and you'll appreciate having the freedom to stop where you wish. The lowest spot on earth is oppressively hot and muggy in summer, and is best visited in winter or the shoulder months of April or October.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Visit **Bethany-Beyond-the-Jordan** (p141), one of the most important biblical sites in Jordan, where Jesus is believed to have been baptised
- Pack a newspaper and enjoy the bizarre buoyancy of floating in the **Dead Sea** (p143) and finish off with a mudpack to polish the pores
- Splash, swim, float and hike your way through the canyons and pools of the **Wadi Mujib Nature Reserve** (p146)
- Splurge on a day pass to the pools and/or spas of the **Dead Sea Resorts** (p145), followed by a fine meal or a sunset cocktail overlooking the Dead Sea





History

Throughout its history, the Dead Sea has changed names as often as it has shifted shorelines. The prehistoric lake, known as Lake Shagour or Lisan Lake, filled the entire Jordan Valley up to the Sea of Galilee until it split in two some 15,000 years ago. The sea was known in biblical times variously as the Salt Sea, the Sea of the Arabah or the Sea of the Plain. Local Arabic names translate as the Sea of Zo'ar, the Stinking Sea and the current name, the Sea of Lot.

The southeast corner of the sea is thought to be the location of Sodom and Gomorrah (see p147). Furthermore, archaeologists now believe that the other 'Five Cities of the Plain' (group of early city states on the Dead Sea plain, referenced in ancient texts and the Bible and sought for years by archaeologists) – Bela/Zoar (modern Safi), Admah (Fifa) and Zeboiim (Khanazir) – can be linked to the nearby towns and wadis of Safi, Fifa and Khanazir respectively, all supplied with fresh water wadis and located next to bitumen processing centres.

The Greeks and Romans named the lake the 'Pitch Sea' after the bitumen traded by the Nabataeans to the Egyptians (who used it for waterproofing and mummification). Ships laden with bitumen regularly crossed the sea in ancient times, as illustrated in a section of the 6th-century Madaba mosaic map (see p152). Trade in indigo, sulphur and sugar was also important historically, as was copper; the world's earliest copper mines are by the shores of the Dead Sea.

Hot springs pepper the sea's shores and have been popular since Roman times. Herod himself sailed across the sea to the spa at Callirhoe near Herodius Spring to get treatment for a skin complaint. Byzantine Christians also regularly travelled to the area, following pilgrim roads to Bethany, Mt Nebo and Lot's Cave.

The northern half of the sea's western shore belonged to Jordan when the famous Dead Sea scrolls were discovered by a Bedouin shepherd at Qumran in 1947. Israel took control of the entire western shore in 1967 after the Six Day War.

Getting There & Away

The Dead Sea Highway (Hwy 65) is the least used of the three main highways crossing Jordan from north to south, but

FAST FACTS

- The Dead Sea is the lowest spot on earth at 408m below sea level
- The Dead Sea has shrunk by 30% in recent years
- Jordanians call the Dead Sea depression 'al-Ghor', or the Sunken Land

it's a quicker and more interesting alternative to the Desert Highway if you're driving between Amman and Aqaba. Some scenery along the Dead Sea shoreline is superb, especially at the southern end. Around Safi, however, there are numerous trucks from the nearby potash factory and the southern stretches of the highway south of the Dead Sea are barren and desolate.

If you're driving, be aware that there are few petrol stations and places to eat, and there is no access to Petra from the highway, although there is a road to Karak. Much of the highway runs along the border of Israel & the Palestinian Territories, so keep your documents handy, including passport, driver's licence, rental contract and *ruksa* (registration card) for the car.

Getting Around

There is a lack of public transport south of Suweimah so you'll probably have to hitch between Suweimah and Safi. This is a good place to have a car and you can combine a visit to the Dead Sea with the Dead Sea Panorama and Madaba.

BETHANY-BEYOND-THE-JORDAN (AL-MAGHTAS)

Then Jesus came from the Galilee to the Jordan to be baptised by John.
(Matthew 3:13)

This took place in Bethany beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing.
(John 1:28)

Known in Arabic as Al-Maghtas, the 'Baptism Site' has been identified by archaeologists as the place where John the Baptist preached, where Jesus was baptised by John, where the first five apostles met and thus where the foundations of the early

Christian faith were laid. Jesus is said to have come here to meet en route from Galilee and Umm Qais and is believed to have spent three days here before heading off to spend 40 days in the nearby wilderness. John was later arrested and beheaded by Herod at Machaerus, also in Jordan (see p162).

The site was known to the Greeks as Sapphas and to the Bible as Bethany, from the Aramaic Beit Anniya ('House of the Crossing'). Pilgrim churches, guesthouses and a 6th-century pilgrim road grew up around the site, which was visited, as it is today, en route from Jerusalem to Mt Nebo.

As early as 1899, works along the east bank of the Jordan River revealed ancient remains. It wasn't until works were carried out by archaeologists and activists clearing landmines (following the 1994 peace treaty with Israel & the Palestinian Territories) that the remains of churches, caves, extensive wells and water channels, as well as several baptism pools, were found. After much debate, scholars declared the area as the site of John the Baptist's mission and Jesus' baptism, locating it from descriptions in the Bible and from 3rd- to 10th-century pilgrim accounts. Events culminated with Pope John Paul II conducting a massive open-air mass at the site in the spring of 2000.

In addition to the celebrated baptism, Bethany-Beyond-the-Jordan is where Jesus 'went back across the Jordan to the place where John had been baptising to escape persecution from Jerusalem' (John 10:40). Many also believe that it was from here that the prophet Elijah (who was born in Mar Elias in north Jordan) ascended to heaven in a whirlwind:

And as they still went on and talked, behold, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them. And Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven.

2 Kings 2:11

Beyond its religious significance the site has a fine location, with views of the Dead Sea, Mt Nebo, Jericho (12km away), Jerusalem (27km away) and the Jordan River. The Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature (RSCN) wants to protect the

surrounding marsh and reed lands, and the birds and insects that rely on it.

Information

All vehicles must park at the entrance to the **site** (adult/Jordanian/under 12 JD5/1/free; ☒) 8am-3pm winter Nov-Mar & Ramadan, 8am-5pm summer Apr-Oct). Pick up a brochure and map at the main gate, where there are toilets, souvenir shops and a restaurant. Even the flies here are of biblical plague proportions. The entry fee includes a guided tour, and a free shuttle bus takes you down to the main site close to the sensitive border with Israel & the Palestinian Territories. Most tours last one hour but you can request a longer tour for no extra charge.

The Site

The shuttle bus makes a brief stop at Tell Elias (see right), where the prophet Elias is said to have ascended to heaven after his death, and then normally continues to the last parking lot, where there is a modern pool for baptisms in filtered water from the Jordan River (the river itself is deeply polluted). The tour visits the **Spring of John the Baptist**, one of several places where John is believed to have been baptised. Most baptisms were actually carried out in the spring-fed waters of the Wadi al-Kharrar, rather than in the Jordan River. The path leads through thickets of tamarisk and *argul* (wild cherry) and the yellow rose of Jericho in spring.

The main archaeological site is the remains of three churches, one on top of the other. Steps lead down to what was once the water level and a small building nearby marks the likely **site of Jesus' baptism**. Byzantine churches grew up to mark the site during the 5th and 6th centuries, rebuilt on the same site twice after they were destroyed by flooding. You can see traces of original mosaics.

The trail passes a new golden-roofed Greek Orthodox church, then past border guards to the **Jordan River**, in reality a brown sludgy mess. You can be baptised in the Jordan – if you had the foresight to bring your own priest. Facing off across the river (and the border) is a rival Israeli baptism complex. This is the only place where civilians can currently touch the Jordan River as the remainder lies in a militarised no-man's-land.

Tours often return via the **House of Mary the Egyptian**, a reformed sinner who lived and died in the two-room house in the 4th century. The trail continues left, then on up some wooden stairs (originally a rope) to a two-room **hermit cave** burrowed into the soft rock.

On the way back you can ask to be dropped at **Tell Elias** (Elijah's Hill). The fixing of Tell Elias was important in locating the baptism site as there are strong theological links between Elijah and John the Baptist. The rebuilt arch marks the 5th- to 6th-century pilgrim chapel, where the late Pope John Paul II authenticated the site in March 2000. The nearby rectangular prayer hall is the earliest structure at the site and one of the earliest Christian places of worship ever discovered, dating from the 3rd century when the young religion was still illegal.

The hill behind holds the presumed cave of John the Baptist, a 5th-century monastery which was built around the site and the **Rhotorios Monastery**, which has a mosaic floor with Greek inscriptions. You can see the 3rd- to 4th-century baptism pools and water cisterns used by early pilgrims who would descend steps into the plaster-lined pools. In the early years of Christianity, John was a more celebrated figure than Jesus and this was the more important of the two pilgrimage sites. Muslims venerate John as the prophet Jahia bin Zakharia (there is no baptism in Islam).

Other sites such as the faint remains of a pilgrim resthouse and more pools can be visited during the longer tour.

Eating

Talloubi Restaurant (☎ 079 5574020; fish JD3.850; ☒ lunch & dinner) A better bet than John's Retreat if you have a car, this great fish restaurant is run by Jordan Fisheries, which specialises in excellent tilapia (*talloubi* in Arabic). It's popular at weekends, particularly at dusk, as the sun sets over distant Jerusalem. It's a 2km detour off the road halfway between the baptism site and the main Amman-Dead Sea road.

John's Retreat (mains JD3-5) This normally deserted place at the visitors centre has cold beer (JD2.750) if you need a break.

Getting There & Away

There are signs to the 'Baptism Site' along the road from Amman to the Dead Sea.

Take any minibus to Suweimah. About 5km before the town, the road makes a 90-degree turn; the Dead Sea is to the left, the baptism site to the right. There is no public transport for the 5km to the visitor centre so you'll have to hitch, charter a taxi or walk (take plenty of water).

A taxi from Madaba to the site, taking in the Dead Sea and Mt Nebo en route costs around JD20.

SHUNEH AL-JANUBIYEH (SOUTH SHUNA)

الشونة الجنوبية

☎ 05

This nondescript town is simply a junction for public transport to the Dead Sea and north through the Jordan Valley. The town is well connected by minibus with Amman's Dead Sea bus station (500 fils, 45 minutes), as well as with Madaba (350 fils, 45 minutes) and Salt (250 fils, 45 minutes).

There are a few cheap restaurants in town, as well as places to buy food for a picnic. Because of the limited public transport to places like Bethany-Beyond-the-Jordan, chartering a taxi from Shuneh al-Janubiyyeh to visit several sites in a few hours is a good

idea (JD5 to JD10), and cheaper than chartering in Amman.

DEAD SEA RESORTS

منتجعات البحر الميت

☎ 05

Part of the border between Jordan and Israel & the Palestinian Territories goes through the Dead Sea, a lake with such high salinity that your body floats – suicidal travellers should note that drowning would be quite a feat here. The main centre of tourism on the Jordanian side of the sea is a collection of plush resorts and a nearby public beach, about 5km south of Suweimah, and this is where most visitors will get their first salty taste of the sea.

The Dead Sea is about 65km long and from 6km to 18km wide. Its main source is the Jordan River, but it has no outlet. It's an intense blue lake enclosed by red and browns of the surrounding desert hills.

The name is apt because the incredibly high salt content (30%) is over six times greater than the ocean, so plant and animal life is impossible. The only thing swimming in the Dead Sea are a few tourists.

THE DEAD SEA IS DYING

Every year record books have to be rewritten, as the world's lowest spot gets a little lower. Water levels have fallen from 392m to 408m below sea level (some experts put the water level at closer to 420m), and about 30% (approximately 350 sq km) of the original area has vanished. The level of the Dead Sea has been falling by about 500cm every year for the past 20 years or more, mainly because there is no longer any regular inflow from the near-stagnant Jordan River, water is diverted from the sea for irrigation (only 10% of the natural inflow now reaches the sea), and because evaporation is so high. Additionally more than one million tonnes of water are pumped daily into vast evaporation ponds in the south, covering some 10,000 hectares, in the manufacture of about four million tonnes of potash annually. This southern basin hasn't been connected to the main sea since the 1980s. At this rate some experts even believe the lake may dry up completely in 50 years.

In a bid to reverse the trend, a 180km canal from the Red Sea down to the Dead Sea (known as the Two Seas or Red to Dead canal project) is planned. The aim is to reverse the drop and then restore to historical levels and create enough hydroelectricity along the way to power desalination plants in Jordan and Israel & the Palestinian Territories. Around 45% of the water transferred would be transformed into fresh water.

The biggest hurdle is not the US\$4 to US\$6 billion required to fund the project but the fact that it requires cooperation between Israel, the Palestinian Territories and Jordan, and thus a resolution of the peace process itself. And that may take some time. Still, agreement was reached on a US\$20 million feasibility study in May 2005.

Environmental organisations want the sea to be recognised as a World Heritage site, which would offer it some protections.

For more information on the dangers to the Dead Sea, contact the **Friends of the Earth – Middle East** (www.foeme.org; info@foeme.org).

Swimming here is also difficult because you're too high in the water to stroke properly, but of course you can always float on your back while reading the newspaper and have your picture taken. The buoyancy you'll experience is the sort of thing that you can only understand once you've been and you will invariably hear squeals of surprise from people visiting here for the first time. While paddling about you will probably discover cuts you never knew you had (don't shave before visiting), and if any water gets in your eyes, be prepared for a few minutes of agony.

The concentration of salt has nothing to do with the Dead Sea being below sea level; rather it comes about because of the high evaporation rate which has, over the years, led to a build-up of salts.

At the southern end of the lake, Jordanians are exploiting the high potash content of the mineral-rich water, making Jordan one of the world's largest producers. The Dead Sea also contains various other minerals, many of which are apparently excellent for one's health and skin. Most souvenir shops in Jordan stock various 'Dead Sea' creams, lotions, gels and soaps, all of which contain extractions from the lake, thereby exacerbating the environmental damage.

Most budget travellers choose to take a day trip from either Amman or, increasingly, Madaba. The main reason to stay is to enjoy the spectacular sunset.

Information

Try to avoid Fridays and public holidays when the hotels and public areas are in chaos and public transport is crowded; on any other day there will be few other people around. Always take lots of water as the humidity and heat (over 40°C in summer) can be dehydrating and there's little shade.

Swimming

After a dip in the Dead Sea, you'll find yourself coated in uncomfortable encrustations of salt that are best washed off as soon as you can. A shower (and shampoo and soap) afterwards is vital. If showers are not available, some readers have recommended bringing a few bottles of water for an abridged version of the same thing.

The most expensive way to swim in the Dead Sea is at one of the upmarket hotels

THE DEAD SEA ULTRA MARATHON

For most visitors, the Dead Sea is a place to relax and enjoy the novelty of floating at the world's lowest point or being pampered at an upmarket spa complex. And then for others, there's the Dead Sea Ultra Marathon. Starting at Safeway on 7th Circle in Amman, it involves a 50km run (individually or in a relay) down to the Dead Sea at Amman Beach, as well as a half-marathon, a 10km fun run and a kid's run of 4km (none of us here could even manage that). In case you think that this is the preserve of a few mad locals, bear in mind that around 1000 runners take part every year. The race generally takes place on the second Friday in April so if you're keen for a bit of extreme sport, contact the **Amman Rd Runners group** (☎ 06 5677660; www.deadseamarathon.com) or any tourist office for details.

(see opposite), about 5km south of Suweimah, where you pay at least JD10, and probably more, for access to their beaches and other facilities, including shower and swimming pool. The Mövenpick charges JD20 for access to its pools and beach, or JD27 for its spa, pools and beach. The Marriott charges JD15. The Dead Sea Spa Hotel charges JD10 (JD5 for kids), which entitles you to a discounted rate for their buffet (JD8). An all-body Dead Sea 'mud pack' is reported to do wonders for your skin.

AMMAN BEACH

شاطيء عمان
This public beach (☎ 3560800; adult/child/Jordanian JD4/2/1; ☎ 24hr), 2km south of the main hotel strip, is run by Amman municipality as an affordable option for both locals and travellers, and so it is the most popular place for budget travellers to enjoy a dip in the sea. The beach is clean, with sun umbrellas, fresh-water showers and a vibrant local scene that is missing from the sanitised five-star resorts.

It can get very busy at weekends (Thursday night and Fridays), when locals bring their own food and fuel for the public barbecue grills, rent a lounge bed (JD1) and party overnight. There is a restaurant (JD7 buffet), some drinks stalls, basketball courts and an amusement park next door. Swimming pools are also planned.

Locals will generally swim fully clothed, though foreigners shouldn't feel uncomfortable in modest swimming costumes.

HERODUS (ZARA) SPRING

نبيع هيرودس

All along the eastern shore of the Dead Sea are areas where you are free to float, although you'll have no showers and you'll probably have to hitch a ride from near Suweimah unless you have your own transport. One free place to swim is at the popular Herodus Spring, 10km south of the main hotel strip, though the place can be jammed at week ends. It's marked by a bridge and large military base, and there's fresh (but undrinkable) water in the nearby Wadi Zarqa Ma'in – ideal for washing afterwards. The water's edge is a short walk down the hill, under the bridge. There's little privacy here and it's not a great place for unaccompanied women.

Nearby is the site of ancient Callirhoe, a favourite of Herod who came here in 4 BC to get treatment for a skin condition. There's a small archaeological site (discovered in 1807) to the south of the wadi and there are some remains of the ancient harbour (Herod travelled here by boat). The site is marked on the Madaba mosaic map.

SPLASH OUT!

Herod the Great and Cleopatra were among the many firm believers in the curative powers of a Dead Sea spa. The low levels of UV rays and high oxygen levels are good for your health and the Dead Sea mud contains calcium and magnesium, good for allergies and bronchial infections; pungent bromine to help with relaxation; iodine to alleviate certain glandular ailments; and bitumen to improve the skin. If you feel like a little pampering, book one of these spas in advance.

Zara Spa (☎ 3561110; www.zaraspas.com; ☎ 8.30am-8.30pm) at the Mövenpick is touted as the best in the Middle East. Entry costs JD27 for nonguests (and even costs JD17 for guests!) and includes access to a gym, private beach, pool, sauna, steam room, foot massage pool, infinity pool, aquapressure pool and Dead Sea saltwater pool (27% salt). Extra services include a mud wrap (one hour JD39), dry flotation, hot stone therapy, shiatsu and other massages (from JD23 for 25 minutes) and facials. A day package costs JD100 to JD136 for 2½ hours of treatments, or blow out with the three-day package for JD255.

Spa (☎ 8am-10pm, treatments 9am-8.30pm) at the Dead Sea Marriott is free for guests or JD15 for nonguests (JD25 with the beach, pools and gym), and includes a heated pool, Dead Sea saltwater pool, Jacuzzi, steam room, sauna and 24-hour gym. Treatments are run by the Sanctuary of London and include massage (JD57 per hour), body wraps, salt scrubs, phytomer facials, mud facials, dry flotation and hydro baths. Weekday packages (Sunday to Wednesday) range from JD45 to JD109.

Dead Sea Spa (☎ 5601554; ☎ 9am-6pm), at the Dead Sea Spa Hotel, has more of a focus on medical treatments, with an in-house dermatologist and physiotherapist. Entry to the beach, pools and spa costs JD12 and includes a fitness room, solarium and Dead Sea saltwater pool. A full-body Swedish massage or mud application costs JD22. A JD50 day's package includes a Swedish massage, mud pack and the use of the pool and gym.

Sleeping & Eating

About 5km south of Suweimah along the Dead Sea Highway are a number of upmarket pleasure palaces so opulent that they issue their own hotel maps to help guests find their way to their rooms. The pools and lush grounds are particularly wonderful on balmy spring and autumn nights. You'll need a booking for the weekend (Thursday night, Friday and Saturday).

Crowne Plaza (☎ 3560110; ☎) On the north-eastern shore of the lake, in Suweimah, the former government rest house is currently being redeveloped by Holiday Inn into a luxury resort.

Dead Sea Marriott (☎ 3560360; www.marriotthotels.com/qmdj; r from JD93, plus JD10/20 for pool view/poolside r, plus JD10 for weekend stay; ☎ ☎ ☎) Lovely and stylish but more ostentatious than the Mövenpick. Dining options include the Mosaico buffet (JD20; Monday night is seafood), Jo's Brasserie (good for steaks), the very pleasant Acacia Bar, a poolside bar and Champions sports bar. Good kids' facilities include a jungle playground, a mini waterfall, movies and a family pool.

Mövenpick Resort & Spa (☎ 3561111; www.moevenpick-deadsea.com; r standard/superior/deluxe JD120/

140/160; ☒ ☑ ☒) The resort to beat, with a kasbah-style village concealing luxury accommodation, tennis courts, swimming pools (including an 'infinity pool'), Zara Spa (p145) and a private beach. There are nine bars and restaurants, including Asian and Italian restaurants, a poolside bar, Al-Saraya buffet (JD15), Thursday night barbecues and Friday brunch (JD18). All rooms come with a balcony. Poor staff let the facilities down at times.

Dead Sea Spa Hotel (☎ 3561000; www.jordandeadsea.com; s/d JD71/85, ste from JD156; ☑ ☒) About 200m south of the Mövenpick, this complex is a definite notch down in luxury but is still nice if you haven't seen the luxury neighbours. There's a medical/dermatological spa (see the boxed text, p145), a decent beach, a big pool and separate kids' pool with slides. Choose from rooms in the main block or bungalows. There's a Lebanese restaurant or hit the buffet (JD13).

The **Kempinski Hotel Ishtar** (www.kempinski.com) is currently being built in the location between the Mövenpick and the Dead Sea Spa Hotel, and should open in 2006.

Getting There & Away

HITCHING

Hitching back to Amman from Amman Beach is relatively easy; Friday and Sunday are the best days.

MINIBUS

Public transport only runs as far as Suweimah. Some budget hotels in Amman organise day trips to the Dead Sea so ask around. For details of getting to/from the Dead Sea from the capital, see p100. See p158 for details of reaching the Dead Sea from Madaba.

TAXI

A return taxi costs about JD30 for the day or JD15 for a one-way drop from Amman, and far less from Shuneh al-Janubiyyeh. It's a bit pointless if you're only interested in a long and leisurely bathe, but it does allow you to seek out better (and free) bathing spots along the shore.

DEAD SEA PANORAMA

بانوراما البحر الميت

This **lookout, museum and restaurant** complex, opened in 2005 high above the Dead Sea, offers some breathtaking views. As part of the

project, the Dead Sea Parkway winds down from the Madaba-Hammamat Ma'in road to the Dead Sea Highway, offering a great new route between the Dead Sea resorts and Madaba. See p162 for details.

WADI MUJIB NATURE RESERVE

محمية الموجب

The lower Wadi Mujib gorge is now part of the vast Wadi Mujib Nature Reserve (*Mahmiyyat al-Mujib*; 215 sq km), which ranges from an altitude of 900m above sea level to 400m below. It was established by the RSCN for the captive breeding of the Nubian ibex but it also forms the heart of an exciting ecotourism project.

The reserve supports a surprising variety of over 400 species of plants (including rare orchids), 186 species of birds and 250 animal species. The wildlife includes the Nubian ibex, Syrian wolf, striped hyena, caracal and Blandford's fox. It is also an important staging post for migratory birds travelling between Africa and Europe.

Challenges to the reserves ecosystems include illegal hunting by local Bedouin tribes, overgrazing by goats and the demands of mining companies for licenses to start mineral extraction.

Information

First stop is the **visitor centre** (☎ 03 2313059; admission JD1), right by the Dead Sea Highway, about 20km south of the Dead Sea resorts, where you'll pay entry fees and pick up a guide if required. Guides are compulsory for the trails and should be booked in advance through the RSCN in Amman (see p70). Only 25 people per day are allowed on each trail and there's a minimum group size of five. Apart from the Ibex Trail, children are not allowed on the trails. Life jackets are provided.

The Malaqi, Mujib Canyon and Siq trails are only open between 1 April and 31 October, due to the risk of flash floods, but the actual opening dates depend on local water levels and the state of the trails, so ring in advance. Other trails are accessible year-round. The region is extremely hot and dry in summer, so get going early in the morning and take sunscreen and lots of drinking water. For the water trails, bring a swimming costume, towel, some shoes that can get wet, and a waterproof bag for your valuables and camera.

The campground has a solar-powered boat which visitors can rent for JD30 per half-hour.

Hiking

The RSCN allows hiking along half a dozen trails in the reserve, all of which require a RSCN guide.

The easiest activity on offer is the **Siq Trail** (JD8 per person), a lovely 2km splash up into the gorge, ending at a dramatic waterfall. Imagine hiking up Petra's Siq, with a river running through it. The weir at the entrance to the gorge diverts fresh water from the wadi for human use.

The **Malaqi Trail** (JD40 per person) is a guided half-day trip that involves a hot and sweaty hike up into the wadi, a visit to the lovely swimming pools of Wadi Hidan and then a descent (often swimming) through the *siq*, finally rappelling down the 18m waterfall (not appropriate for nonswimmers or those with a fear of heights). It's not cheap but it's definitely one of the most exciting things you can do in a day in Jordan. If you have limited time you can do a shorter version of the trail, the **Mujib Canyon Trail**, for JD30. The trail starts 3km south of the visitor centre.

Other options include the year-round **Ibex Trail** (JD8 per person), a half-day guided hike that leads up to a Nubian ibex enclosure at the Raddas ranger station, along a ridge that offers views of the Dead Sea, with an optional excursion to the ruined Qasr Riyash.

The **Mujib Trail** (JD25 per person) starts from the ranger station at Fag'ua near the King's Highway and descends down wadis to the Raddas ranger station or Wadi Mujib gorge (JD40 per person).

The **Mukawir-Zara Trail** (JD20 per person) is on the northern boundaries of the park and descends 700m in 6km to the Herodus (Zara) Hot Springs on the Dead Sea Highway (see p145).

Sleeping

The reserve operates a windy 15-tent **campground** (s/d/tr per person JD20/17/16; ☎ 1 April-15 Oct) on the shores of the Dead Sea but you must use the tents provided. Day use of the camp costs JD5. The small gravel beach and fresh-water showers allow you to swim in the sea, or just enjoy the views of the sea from your tent. Food is available if booked in advance (through the campground itself

IN SEARCH OF SODOM

Most archaeologists agree that the world's wickedest town lay somewhere around the southern end of the Dead Sea, but that's where the agreement ends. Some scientists believe that the site has been underwater off the east bank of the Dead Sea since biblical times.

Most archaeologists now believe that the Bronze Age site of Babh adh-Dhra (the Gate of the Arm), an archaeological site on the edge of Wadi Karak that was destroyed and abandoned in 2300 BC, is the actual site of Sodom. Intriguingly, the former town of 1000 holds the remains of 20,000 tombs, holding an estimated half a million bodies. Both Babh adh-Dhra and the nearby site of Numeirah, believed to be Gomorrah, are covered in a foot-deep layer of ash, suggesting the cities ended in a great blaze.

The Book of Genesis (Gen 19:24-25) outlines God's displeasure at the locals' behaviour. The last straw came when local Sodomites demanded to have sex with the angels who had been sent by God to visit Lot. In response 'the Lord rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire...and he overthrew those cities, and all the plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and that which grew upon the ground...'

Fanciful legends of a fevered biblical imagination? Not necessarily. The whole area is located on a major fault line, and it would not have been the first time that such a zone has been simply swallowed up when the ground collapsed in a cataclysmic slip or a kind of massive implosion, known as 'liquefaction', or collapse of the soil. Another possibility is that an earthquake released large amounts of underground flammable gas and bitumen for which the region was famous (the 'slime pits' referred to in the Old Testament). These substances could have been ignited by fire or a lightning strike.

The observer reporting for the Book of Genesis may well have been describing a terrible natural disaster. Whether or not it was caused by the wrath of God remains a question of faith.

or RSCN/Wild Jordan when booking your accommodation).

Getting There & Away

There's no public transport to the reserve so you need to rent a car or take a taxi from Amman (125km), Madaba or Karak.

LOT'S CAVE

كهف لوط

Now Lot went up out of Zo'ar, and dwelt in the hills with his two daughters, for he was afraid to dwell in Zo'ar; so he dwelt in a cave with his two daughters.

(Genesis 19:30)

One of the few sights along the southwestern side of Jordan is **Lot's Cave** (admission free; ☞ daylight hr), where Abraham's nephew Lot and his daughters lived for years after fleeing the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (see the boxed text, p147). Lot's wife famously turned into a pillar of salt after looking back at the smouldering city.

In an eyebrow-raising incident of incest that's remarkable even for the Bible, Lot's two daughters then spiked their father's drink, had sex with him and then nine months later gave birth to his grandsons/

sons Moab and Ben-Ammi, the forefathers of the Moabite and Ammonite peoples.

The actual cave is on the side of the hill and surrounding it are the ruins of a small Byzantine church (5th to 8th centuries), reservoir and some mosaics, which were excavated by the British Museum. Remains from the cave date to the early Bronze Age (3300–2000 BC) and an inscription in the cave mentions Lot by name. The views west are of the evaporating pools of the local potash industry.

At the base of the hill is the brand new **Lowest Point on Earth Museum**, which has displays on the archaeology of the general region, a café and a couple of hotel rooms.

The archaeological site is 2km north of the phosphate-mining town of Safi (Ghor as-Safi), itself believed to be the historical site of Zo'ar. The cave is known locally as Deir 'Ain Abata, after a local spring, or Kahf Lut, after the Islamic name for the prophet Lot.

The site is signposted from the Dead Sea Highway, and private or chartered vehicles can drive almost to the cave. Regular minibuses run between Karak and Safi (550 fils, one hour). If you're relying on public transport or hitching, be prepared for a 2km walk from the highway, though some minibuses pass the museum en route to Safi.