

Oman, Jordan, Egypt

In the Middle East and have decided to focus this trip report on Oman, Jordan, and Egypt and the five ports we visited there. That will leave the Mediterranean and Atlantic Coast for the last report. Hard to believe it is now Day 108 with 12 days to go. As different as we found India, the Middle East presents its own challenges in understanding the basic cultures and religions and then the differences among them in each country. Oman is a perfect example. We figured this is a Muslim country with a monarch and likely to be conflicted with Sunni and Shiite views all magnified by economic disparity. We learned, however, that Oman is Muslim but the predominant form of Muslim is Ibadi. This manifests itself in what we would describe as an untypical, Arab country that welcomes diversity of culture and religion and fully recognizes the role of women in their society. Women drive, own property, are educated and hold significant positions in the government. Jordan and Egypt, however, tend toward more traditional cultural roles. Women dress more conservatively but do drive and run many of the small businesses. In Jordan 95% of the population are Sunnis while in Egypt the percentage is closer to 85%. There is still harassment of women but they are now being represented in parliament and new laws favor women's rights. Change will take time.

General

Travel in the Arabian Sea, the Gulf of Eden, and the Red Sea in terms of weather and sea state has followed the rest of the trip. Waves have been 1-3' with hazy conditions. Security has been a different matter. In recognition of past issues with pirates in the waters off of Yemen and Ethiopia, the Viking Sun took a number of active and passive measures to include coiled razor wire around the second deck and light restrictions (including closing cabin curtains and outside lighting) as well as bringing on a security augmentation force in Oman. The few glimpses we have of increased security personnel reveal capable professionals undoubtedly equipped to deal with any direct assaults on the vessel. Note: In 2018, there have been NO reports of pirate attacks on commercial shipping. An international navy flotilla routinely patrols these dangerous waters. Passengers have taken all of this in stride and appreciate the proactive approach taken by Viking Cruises.

No change to much of our daily routine which still includes Yoga, art classes, handicrafts, Trivia Pursuit, and a large number of lectures. The latter have really been very helpful in understanding the geography, culture, economy, and religions in this part of the world. Our biologist, Dr. Carin Bondar, gave an excellent talk about why the coral reefs in the Red Sea are unlike any other in the world (higher water temperature and salinity) and why they must be preserved. Excellent. We had three lectures a day on the history, culture and political importance of the region on the world.

Food has trended toward specialties from the region with more cooking classes and theme nights. As the cruise draws to an end, we have spent more and more time dining in private rooms adjacent to the specialty restaurants with best friends made on the trip. Entertainment has been consistently good with flashes of brilliance. A three-person singing and dancing group called The Flyrights, performed twice, once alone and then with Lorraine Brown. The focus of both performances was on the music of Motown and soul with songs from Steve Wonder, Lionel Richie, Sammy Davis, Jr., Otis Redding, and James Brown. They were very good at getting the audience engaged and we all had a fun evening. One of the group sang "Mr. Bojangles," originally done by Sammy Davis, Jr. It was, in my opinion, the best

rendition I have ever heard. At lunch the next day on the ship, I talked with the group and expressed my appreciation for their talent. Note: this ability to meet and greet the performers is a hallmark of Viking Cruises. Our next performer was Paul Fredericks, a comedian and singer from the UK, who is a veteran of the cruise circuit. He had good range and sang songs from every decade starting with the 60s. We also had a master magician named, Brett Sherwood. He did "close magic" where cameras were up close to his hands as he performed a series of card and coin tricks. Very smooth. Our highlight was Lorraine being selected for the final trick of the evening. She went up on stage and was given a sheet of tissue paper. Brett then crumpled the paper into a ball which he then "controlled" to walk over his arm and down his sleeve. He then fashioned the paper into a rose about 8 inches long with leaves at one end and a rose on the other. He then levitated the "rose" in front of him and walked it over to Lorraine and then moved it upside down, sideways, and then back to the vertical never touching the rose itself. Finally, he took out a lighter and set the paper rose aflame ... which then turned into a real rose which he gave to Lorraine. Amazing!

The next performers were a male and female duo. Tabitha sang, played guitar, piano and the Irish whistle (looks like a recorder) while her husband, Adam, played guitar, bass and drums. Called Five O'clock Somewhere, they performed classic rock through modern pop. Their final set was a medley of rock tunes where they alternated playing in a sort of musical "duel." We would call it a draw as they both were excellent. Our next entertainer was called Harry the Piano. He was very clever as he played an extraordinary range of music to include taking requests for songs and interpreting them in various styles. He has recorded and toured with Andrea Bocelli, David Bowie, Gloria Estefan, and Rod Stewart as well having been a BBC TV musical director for over ten years. We also had a mentalist, Marc Paul, who has his own BBC TV program called "Mind Games." He seemed to know facts about different people in the audience that defy explanation so we were glad we were not a victim in this case. He was followed by Jon Courtenay, a comedian/singer/piano player who was billed as "one of the greatest performers you have never heard of." He started slowly but turned out to be really funny, great sense of timing with his jokes, and an excellent piano player. He was surprisingly good.

Jon was followed by the MacDonald Brothers, Craig and Bryan, who finished fourth in the X Factor TV show produced by Simon Cowell and have five albums to their credit. The Scottish duo sang and played piano, accordion, recorder, violin, and guitar. We enjoyed them very much. Our last entertainer for this report was Georgina Jackson, a singer and trumpet player (yes, trumpet player) who has backed Nancy Sinatra, Seal, The Four Tops and Gladys Knight as well as numerous jazz bands. She currently plays in Jazz clubs and at a festivals in the UK. She was terrific. Excellent trumpet player who played Louis Armstrong's greatest hits.

Excursions

1. **Muscat (Oman).** After India and the issues we noted with population density, sanitation, etc., we were pleasantly surprised by Oman.



As one pulls into the port of Muscat you see white buildings arrayed against a background of barren mountains. It is a stunning contrast. The population of Oman is just over 4.8 million but, significantly, 2.2 million are expatriates from other nations, especially India. These “guest workers” do a majority of the infrastructure work in the country as well as support agriculture (Oman actually exports food). The population of the city of Muscat is just over 800,000 clustered mostly near the coast. We rarely saw a motorcycle and cars were all late models and extremely clean. We discovered that car owners can be fined for dirty automobiles and car washes were everywhere. The country is an absolute monarch ruled by Sultan Qaboos Bin Said Al Said who overthrew his father in 1970 and, capitalizing on newly discovered large oil reserves, literally pushed his country into the 21st Century. The road networks and cross overs are impressive. There currently is no rail system but one is under construction. There are universities, hospitals, mosques, and traditional souks everywhere. We saw a car window sticker which said in English, “Before Qaboos, there was nothing.” This shows the impact of the Sultan during his long reign. However, purportedly, the Sultan has cancer and there is no announced heir so this does raise some uncertainty for the future.



We took the Muscat City Tour which included the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque, the House of Al Zubair Museum (literally a museum built around restored homes of Sheik Al Zubar), and a visit to the Muttra Souk (a very large, covered set of streets with shops displaying a wide variety of products.) We especially liked the Al Zubar Museum for its historical examples of art and culture as well as swords, daggers, and early 19th and 20th Century weaponry. These latter items celebrated the successful overthrow of Portuguese rule (over 105 years) by Omanis which contrasts with other colonial experiences where succeeding foreign powers usually replaced former powers. Other tours offered went to a large, commercial fish market (selling very large tuna) and others went on 4x4 treks South of Muscat. Everyone commented on how modern and clean the entire country appeared. Note: Oman shares a border with Yemen to the South, Saudi Arabia to the West and the UAE to the North. Opposite Oman, across the Gulf of Oman is Iran. All of these countries present varying degrees of security concerns to Oman. Internally, there are movements supporting democratic reforms but these have thus far gained little traction. Bottom line, we loved the city and what we were able to see of the countryside.

2. **Aqaba (Jordan).** The city of approximately 150,000 inhabitants is Jordan's only coastal city and for centuries has been the key to its prosperity as the crossroads of trade not only internal to the region but from the Far East to Europe. Jordan's current population is 9.5 million which includes over 2.9 million "guests." Our Jordanian guide explained that many of these expatriates have come only in the last 3-5 years as a result of conflicts in Iraq and Syria but that they do not consider these people as refugees because Jordanian culture accepts these people into their homes as Arab countrymen. The government of Jordan provides medical care and education

support but a lack of jobs for native-born Jordanians has now pushed unemployment to over 32% of the population. Further, the near one-third increase in population is taxing water resources that had been estimated to last 90 years but now may last less than 50 years. Our guide was surprisingly frank in stating his frustration with the Jordanian parliament which is staffed with representatives of over 130 tribes regardless of qualifications for office. As the country is ruled by an absolute monarchy, no policy is implemented unless approved by the king. The economic disparity evident in Jordan has only been exacerbated by the last seven years of regional political instability which has negatively impacted tourism. Wherever we went we saw unfinished foundations for large resort communities and half-finished hotels. There were very few cars on the roads and most traffic was large flatbed trucks going to and from the port. The area is well known for the exploits of Lawrence of Arabia in the 1917 Battle of Aqaba where the Turks were driven from the city's fortress. However, better known and of greater historical significance is the ancient city of Petra, a 2-hour drive north of the city. We took the Magnificent Petra tour (10 hours) which lived up to its name. Petra dates to about 300 B.C. and was the capital of the ancient Nabatean Kingdom. It can only be accessed from a narrow canyon called Al Siq and contains tombs and temples carved into solid pink sandstone cliffs which give it its nickname of the Rose City.



We walked to Petra downhill for almost 45 minutes. Finally, just as the walls seem to narrow and narrow, you come to an open area and the first thing visible is a large temple-like building called the Treasury. It is overwhelmingly impressive with architectural features from the Greeks, Romans, and the native population. It is the setting for the movie, "Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade." We continued past the Treasury to a number of tombs and dwellings flanking

the valley. We saw an amphitheater that could hold over 7,000 and more temples carved into the rock face. Some 75% of Petra has still not been explored or restored. As our guide pointed out, the very path we walked upon is built on 10' of Roman roads and pathways which in turn are built on 10' of roads and pathways of the original Nabateans. What we observed throughout the area that looked like tops of temples at ground level turned out to be the tops of temples that have not yet been excavated.

We toured Petra for about two hours and then took over an hour to get back through the canyon and back uphill to our starting point. Many, many folks struggled with the heat and dehydration and we took our time getting back and were thankful for the lunch break that followed. Other shorter excursions were offered to the Shoback Crusader Castle and Wadi Rum: Footsteps of Lawrence of Arabia but we were glad to have done Petra which is considered one of the new Seven Wonders of the World (along with Angkor Wat, Machu Picchu, and the Great Wall of China.)

3. **Safaga (Luxor, Egypt).** After the long day at Petra, Lorraine and I decided that taking the long (13-hour) cross-country tours to Luxor, Karnak, and the Valley of the Kings would not do justice to what Egypt has to offer. Too much compressed into too little time. Thus, we decided to book a separate, 2020 trip with Viking to visit Israel and Egypt and spend approximately 17 days in the two countries. The Viking tour includes both overland excursions as well as a riverboat cruise on the Nile. Thus, we can prepare better for the trip, see more (especially adding Israel), and better pace ourselves. We did, however, opt for a Red Sea Snorkel tour which started from a nearby resort less than 20 minutes from the port of Safaga. We cruised for about 35 minutes and then snorkeled for 30 minutes, went to another site and snorkeled for 45 minutes. The equipment was excellent as was the boat crew. The visibility was 60'+ and exactly what I thought the Great Barrier Reef would be but was not. We were given plasticized pamphlets with fish and coral pictures to help identify what we saw and we did see literally hundreds of fish. One sighting was of a Red Sea Octopus which had a head about the size of a basketball but legs less than 3' long. It is referred to as a stumpy octopus by the locals. As the temperature on land was over 95 degrees, we were thankful to be in the water and not sweltering in the desert after a 3-hour bus ride like our fellow passengers. Interestingly, the owner of the dive and snorkeling company was a German who came to the area 25 years ago. He too expressed concern over the last seven year decline in tourism due to political issues but felt that tourism was beginning to come back. He also commented on the refugee problem where Egypt accepts refugees but does not support them in terms of medical care or education. They usually work in the service industry but again, the lack of tourism has killed the hotel industry.
4. **Sharm El-Sheikh (Egypt).** The city sits on the southern tip of the Sinai Peninsula and is a major resort area famed for its beaches and amazing coral reefs. It is a scuba diver's paradise. The city itself is relatively small at 75,000 and its economy is 100% dependent on tourism. The initial impression of the harbor area was of modern, low profile resorts with wide beach fronts and nestled into the stark mountain plateau just beyond the formal buildings. By my count there were over 100 glass bottom boats and diving/snorkeling boats in the harbor. We had over 600 passengers take advantage of these up to date boats which had bathrooms and snacks on

board. We, however, decided to take the “Off-the-Beaten-Track Desert Jeep Tour (5 hours) to a Bedouin settlement. The transportation for the tour was “4x4 jeeps” which turned out to be Toyota pickups that have been converted to carry six passengers in two rows in the back. Actually, we only had four passengers plus a driver and a security officer. There were at least four security personnel with the convoy of 15 vehicles plus a chase police vehicle. We were assured that there was no specific threat but they wanted tourists “to feel safer.” On our one hour drive we passed through at least six checkpoints that were all manned by police (some wearing vests, some armed, most not.) We had the definite impression that this was more of a “full employment” exercise rather than serious security. Our guide seemed to back up this impression but was more guarded with his comments than our guide in Jordan. We went to a mangrove preserve and reforestation site by the sea at the Nabq National Park, visited a small museum (established by Stuttgart University from Germany but now, not well maintained), stopped by an acacia tree in the middle of the desert (it needs little water and has an extremely deep root system), and finally, drove to the Bedouin settlement in Wadi Mandar. We saw lots of children, no women except for a belly dancer specifically brought in as a tourist show, camel rides were offered, and we were served tea, flatbread, and humus as snacks. The homes were modest and frankly did not look lived in with a few exceptions. We learned later that most of the inhabitants in fact live elsewhere and come “to work” at the settlement to support tourism. One of our fellow passengers asked if the Bedouins “wanted to be free to roam the desert like their ancestors” but the guide said that the latest generation of Bedouins simply want to better their life styles and are very hard workers who often work multiple jobs and 18-hour days. There are less than 1,000 Bedouins in the region which again is considered a special zone for tourism. We had a decent trip and the drivers obviously relished driving us off road at speeds around 50 KPH. They got us all back to the ship and that is the criteria for success. We got a feel for the region but not an in-depth look at true Bedouins. Note: There was an 8-hour side excursion to St. Catherine’s Monastery which was built between 548 and 565 A.D. It lies at the foot of Mt. Sinai where Moses received the Ten Commandments. A chapel was erected next to what is believed to be the Burning Bush from which God spoke to Moses. The site includes a chapel and the oldest continually operating library in the world. It is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and we hope to see it when we return to Egypt.

5. **Alexandria (Egypt.)** Founded in 331 B.C. by Alexander the Great, the city on the Mediterranean Sea was once the capital of Greco Roman Egypt and was famous for its Pharos Lighthouse erected in 279. B.C., one of the original Seven Wonders of the World. The lighthouse was destroyed in an earthquake in the 15th Century A.D. but the original stones were used to build Sultan Qaitbey’s Fort which still stands today. In fact, two thirds of the original ancient city of Alexandria lies underwater and are active archeological sites. The famous Library of Alexander was destroyed 2,300 years ago, rebuilt, and destroyed again but a new, enormous library was officially opened in 2002 and it is not only a library but contains four separate museums. The city of Alexandria has a population of over 5.2 million while Egypt overall is just under 100 million and thus, the most populous country in the Arab world. Traffic is heavy and as the locals have told us, traffic lights and road signs are guides not rules. Sanitation on main streets was good but side streets and areas outside of the city need a lot of work. If an area is within the tourist district, then it gets attention. We took the National Museum and Ancient

Library Tour. The National Museum is a three-story building that formerly housed the United States consulate but became a museum in 2003. It focuses on ancient Egyptian, Coptic, and the Muslim world but features numerous exhibits of Alexandria's history almost all excavated from surrounding building sites and from underwater sites in the Bay of Alexandria. We saw a stunning stone statue of a father and mother seated next to each other with a small boy between them. The paint colors were in excellent condition. The statue is 4,600 years old. There were hundreds of figurines, jars, jewelry, etc. beautifully preserved by the salt water in the bay. We then took a short bus ride to the new Alexandria Library which contains an exhibition center, planetarium, and the main library. The library has 11 floors to include separate areas for children, students, sight impaired, and the general public. The library is across the street from Alexandria University and thus serves as a research center for the school. We also toured two of the four museums: the Manuscript Museum and the Antiquities Museum. The Manuscript Museum was terrific. It contains the oldest surviving papyrus from the original library as well as a Jewish Torah dating to biblical times. There was an exact stone replica of the Rosetta stone discovered in 1799 that became the basis for translating hieroglyphics (stone contains identical hieroglyphic, Coptic, and ancient Greek texts) into English. The original Rosetta stone is in the British Museum. We also toured the Antiquities Museum with outstanding displays of sculpture and more artifacts discovered while excavating for the library. These included two 20' by 20' mosaics; one displaying a large dog that looked exactly like a modern canine while the other displayed half a scene of two men wrestling. Again, the colors were remarkably preserved. We returned to the ship and started our journey to Malta.

While not a separate excursion, our traversing the Suez Canal was very interesting. Constructed over a ten-year period, the sea level canal (no locks) was opened in 1869 and shortened the standard journey for shipping between the Indian Ocean and the North Atlantic by over 4,300 miles. The original 102 mile canal was lengthened to 120 miles (counting access canals). It is 180' wide at its narrowest point and generally 635' wide in most other areas. It passes through two lakes which allow for ships to pass each other. Several areas of the canal were expanded and widened in 2015 and 2016 adding several new side channels designed to up the daily passage of ships from 47 to 97. These improvements have increased the earnings from the canal from \$5 billion to over \$7 billion per year but the project cost \$8 billion and the government of Egypt had planned on annual revenues of over \$13 billion by 2023. Ironically, lower oil prices have actually pushed some shipping companies to avoid the canal and go around the tip of Africa especially if their cargoes are not time sensitive. Thus, the canal is a constant source of political debate within Egypt. There is not much to see on most of the canal except sand dunes but the closer one gets to the mouth of the canal, the more agriculture is in evidence. There are side canals to Cairo (population over 20 million) and then, the canal opens to the Mediterranean Sea and one sails up the coast to Alexandria.

Fellow passengers who went on the 13-hour trips to Cairo and the pyramids thought they were amazing although they did feel besieged by peddlers and camel drivers all pressing for money. The major sites are very crowded and it was in the high 90s so we think our decision to come back for a longer, more spread out tour in February 2020 makes sense. Temperatures should be more in the 70 degree range. We would lastly mention security which was highly visible in Jordan and Egypt. Every tour had both plainclothes and uniformed police and military. There were numerous checkpoints and the marine

terminals included dogs and vehicle bomb checks. We spotted “hidden” police personnel on the tops of several buildings near the port. While from their perspective they are providing “security,” the majority of passengers felt uncomfortable either being a potential target or just being in the vicinity of armed personnel who could also be a target. We do not see this situation changing in the near term and a single incident in any of the countries involving foreign tourists could shut down a significant portion of the economy. Once again, we were happy that we registered with the U.S State Department’s Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP) which tracks our itinerary and has our emergency contact information.

Crossing the Mediterranean Sea to Malta and beyond.