

# Dead Sea

By: DOMINICK A. MERLE

**DEAD SEA, Jordan---We'll begin at the very end, the mysterious and biblical body of water known as the Dead Sea, the lowest point on the face of the earth, and the final stop on most every Jordan tour.**



A little "rare stone" vendor by the sea

Its very name staggers the imagination---the sea where no one can sink or drown, the source of miraculous cures ranging from sanctity to virility (with hair restoration thrown in), where one can float for hours and read a newspaper (or tablet), and a mud

bath can cleanse your body and soul (along with adding an instant and permanent suntan).

Or is it?

After visiting Jordan's major attractions of the lost city of Petra,

the Roman ruins at Jerash and the Wadi Rum desert where Lawrence of Arabia ruled, most tour operators schedule a quick overnight at one of the Dead Sea resorts, allowing just enough time for a float in the sea and a stop at the spa to stock up on some of those miracle creams and potions.

I spent three days here trying to find out what works and what doesn't.

First, the Dead Sea is not a sea

at all, but technically a landlocked lake surrounded by Jordan, Israel and Palestine. The only water trickling in comes from the River Jordan and there is no way out.

Second, the Dead Sea is not even dead. While there are no plants, fish or any other visible life forms, it is filled with microbes that get along quite happily in the salty mix.

Because of its landlocked position, the sea's salt





A local believer



concentration is almost 35 percent, about 10 times saltier than ocean water. Stones and boulders at the water's edge are encrusted with salt left by the lapping waves.

Yes, the Dead Sea is far and away the lowest point on earth, some 400 meters (1400 feet) below sea level---and it's getting lower each year because water is being diverted to fill the needs of

the surrounding countries. If this continues, scientists predict the sea could eventually be reduced to a wind-swept salt flat.

(By comparison, Death Valley, North America's lowest point, is about 300 feet below sea level, almost five times higher than the Dead Sea.)

Yes, you can float and read a newspaper, and no, you cannot sink, both because of the high salt content. But bad things can still happen.

"You could get shot," the man at the concierge desk at my hotel said with a shrug of his shoulders. "But even then, you won't sink."

He explained that blunt, startling remark.

Tourists are routinely advised to get out of the sea by sundown, as swimming or floating is only allowed during daylight and in designated areas. It's only 10 miles across from Jordan to Israel and Palestine, a distance an expert swimmer could easily handle with float stops.



Bedouin band in desert





If a lone swimmer or group of swimmers are spotted approaching either shore suspiciously in the dead of night, drowning may be the least of their worries. That was also told to me a number of times by various individuals during my three-day stay, although no one could recall the last shooting at sea.

“We think of ourselves as the good kid in a bad neighborhood,” said my Jordanian tour guide,

Manshee, “but anything is possible.”

And what a rough neighborhood it is, with Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Palestine and Egypt all within striking distance.

Yet, despite the geography, I felt perfectly safe during my 10 days touring Jordan, even at some points when we were within actual walking distance of Syria, which was exploding at the time.

“It’s so difficult to convince people in your part of the world that it is not dangerous here,” Manshee continued. “We often say we’re caught between Iraq and a hard place.”

I last visited Jordan 10 years ago, shortly after 9/11. Tourism had dropped to almost nothing, with as few as 50 people a day visiting Petra, one of the Seven Wonders of the World. At that time, entrance to Petra was

actually on sale at half price.

Since then, tourism rose gradually until it hit record numbers in 2010. Then came Arab Spring and that record number was halved.

There are about six sprawling resorts scattered like isolated fortresses along the Dead Sea. A number of others were in the planning stage but put on hold following the Arab Spring. The resort I stayed at was built by the







Tourists at Jerash

Jordanian government as an investment, and is now managed by Holiday Inn as a five-star property.

Getting back to the Dead Sea fact and fiction, no, you can't sink but yes, you can drown. If one accidentally drinks enough of the salt water, the larynx could inflate and lead to suffocation and drowning. Passing out face-first in the water could obviously also lead to drowning.

Consequently, tourists are advised to float rather than try to swim as the heavy salt concentration could burn and damage eyes at the very least.

The alleged medical, therapeutic and beauty benefits credited to the sea waters go all the way back to Cleopatra. She was the first to cash in and had little cosmetic factories built along the shore.

Egyptians used certain elements

from the sea for embalming and mummification. Today, you can see tourists covered face to toe in black mud, shuffling along the shore, looking much like living mummies.

“Many Russians and Scandinavians like to cover themselves in mud,” the man at the concierge desk told me. They think it will darken their skin. They still look the same when they leave.”

But it is generally agreed by both

tourists and locals that the Dead Sea waters and mud will result in a better complexion and help cure skin problems like psoriasis and eczema. Every spa in the area stocks a large supply of potions, lotions, bath salt, facial cream, mud masks, scrubs etc. at prices ranging from \$25 to \$100.

So yes, to an improved skin, but probably not, to the claims of hair restoration, virility and the like.

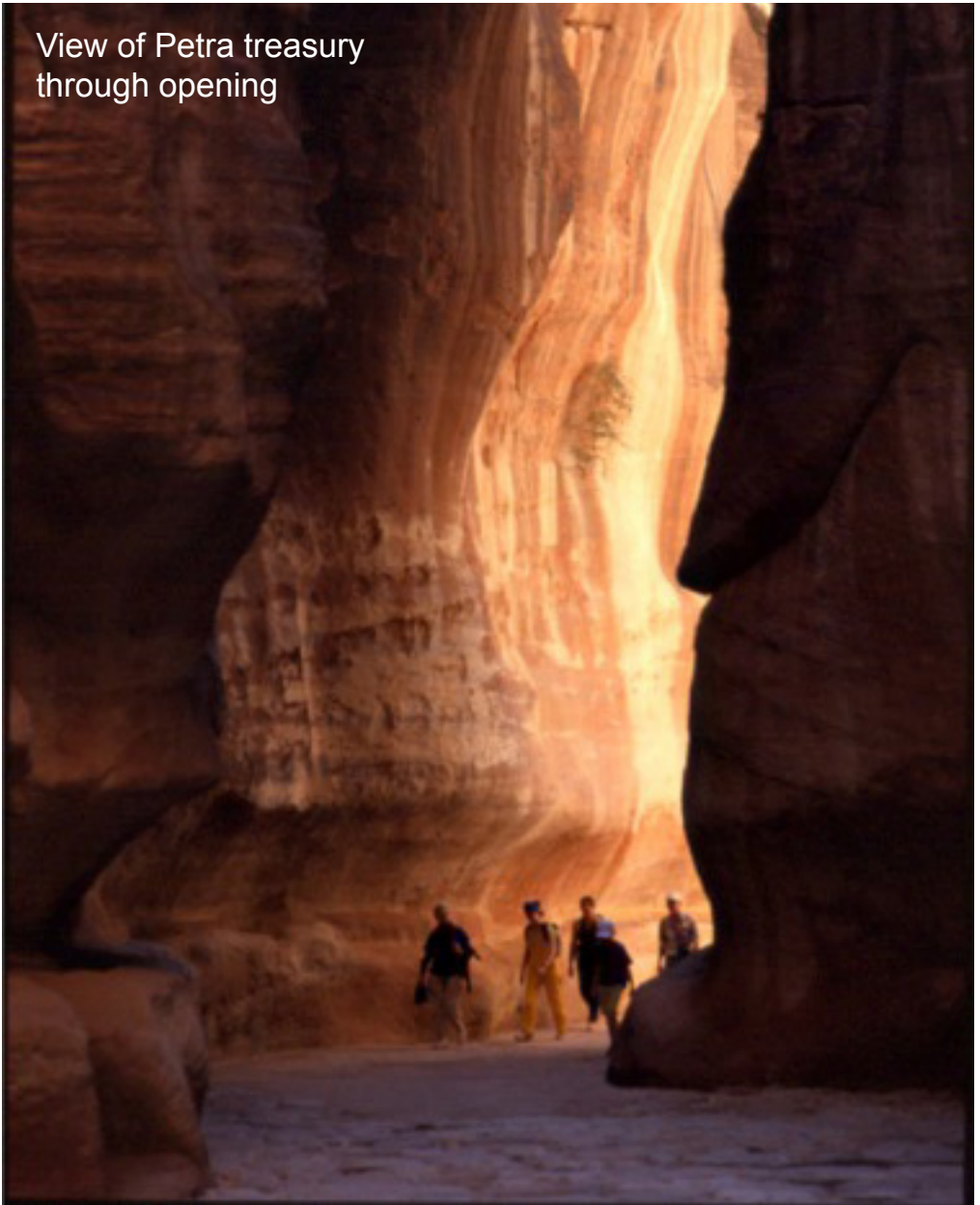
For Christians, the entire Dead Sea area, which covers some 50

View of Dead Sea from Holiday Inn resort





View of Petra treasury through opening



miles, inspires their faith. They believe this is where God first spoke to man and gave the 10 Commandments to Moses, where

Jesus was baptized, where Lot's wife was turned into a pillar of salt, where the infamous cities of Sodom and Gomorrah once stood-

--even all the way back to where the Garden of Eden once flourished.

And so we end with Adam and Eve, where it all began.

Now doesn't it seem almost sacrilegious that, in an area like this, tour operators would allow only enough time to get your toes wet in the Dead Sea?

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#### IF YOU GO

I flew Royal Jordanian Airlines nonstop from Montreal to Jordan's capital of Amman. The airline also has flights from New York, Chicago and Detroit.

Visas are required for North Americans and can be obtained upon entry for about \$25.



White salt encrusted on Dead Sea shoreline



Wadi Rum rock bridge



Pack waterproof sandals or flip flops if you have tender feet as entrance into the Dead Sea is very rocky.

For further information on the Dead Sea area and Jordan try [visitjordan.com](http://visitjordan.com).

Young local tourists

