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Readers: Our Most Precious Asset

A walk through History and Ruins

Jordan through the eyes of Movenpick and Tania Tours

Jordan is a beautiful country with many enchanting sights, ancient cities, scenic and salty beaches, deserts, exotic resorts, unique religious spots like Baptism Site and some wonderful people feels Chandragupta Amritkar after a royal visit to Jordan

Co-ordinating with Ayman Rawadieh, Asst. DoS Jordan, Mövenpick Hotels & Resorts whom I met in India and Amer Khoury, DoS Jordan, Mövenpick Hotels & Resorts whom I met at ITB last year, we planned a schedule in October 2016 to experience all their four hotels located at Dead Sea, Petra, Aqaba and Tala Bay in Jordan. During ITB 2016 also had the pleasure of meeting Bishara Sawalha, CEO Tania Tours and his charming daughter Ashley Sawalha, Manager S&M, Tania Tours. As leading tour operators in Jordan they were quite pleased to show us around their country.

Landing at the Queen Alia International Airport, Amman I was pretty impressed by the way Tania Tours organized my immigration. It was quick and without any hassle as the representative of Tania tours was at the immigration counter. Coming out of the airport I was surprised to see Bishara and Ashley come to pick me up.

Discussing my schedule for the next few days we proceeded to Mövenpick Resort & Spa Dead Sea which was an hour's drive. I was pretty impressed by the rustic genuine Arabic village resort spread across 20 acres of greenery and a total of 346 luxurious rooms. My check in was smooth but it was great to see the respect that Bishara got at the resort as right from the GM, Abedrado Twaissi to Ayman Rawadieh and also a local journalist were all keen to interact with him. After a nice dinner at Al Saraya Restaurant (that serves Buffet breakfast, lunch and dinner) I went to my room – a nice luxurious suite. The resort has ten different room categories and rooms are located in the main building, the village or the beachfront with mountain, garden or sea view.

Floating in Dead Sea: The lowest point on the Earth

The next day morning getting up early I proceeded to the Dead Sea, a salt lake bordered by Jordan to the east and Israel and Palestine to the west, which is the lowest point on the Earth over 400m (1,312 ft.) below sea level. The Dead Sea was just a 10 minute walk from my room – a private beach exclusively for the hotel guests. On the beach it was an amazing sight with the Dead Sea flanked by mountains.

There is no way to sink and you just float along the surface. As I tried to stand, I slipped on a rock and had the most horrifying



experience as the water went into my mouth - the taste was terrible and it took almost an hour to get rid of the salty feeling. Luckily it did not go in my eyes as I was later informed that it makes your eyes burn. Also if you have any cut on your body its not advisable to get into the sea.

Many were applying the rich Dead Sea mud available on the beach and it was really a cool experience though a bit stinky one. Keep the mud on your skin for 15 minutes before soaking again in the Dead Sea. Its truly once in a life time to experience.

This area was one of the world's first health resorts and provided asphalt for Egyptian mummification. They have very effective skin care remedy and the salt and the minerals from the Dead Sea are used to create cosmetics and herbal sachets.

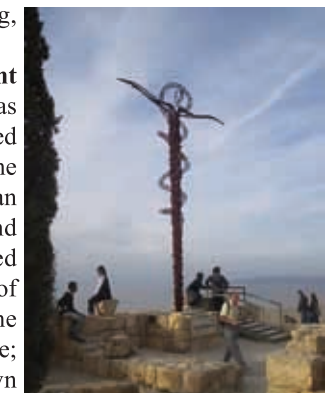
After a refreshing bath I was picked up by the Tania tours guide and driver. The guide mentioned Jordan has five World Heritage Sites - Baptism Site, Petra, Quseir Amra, Um er-Rasas (Kastrom Mefa'a) and Wadi Rum Protected Area. Of these Tania Tours organised visits to three of them.

Our first halt was **Madaba** famous for its Byzantine and Umayyad mosaics, especially a large Byzantine-era mosaic map of Jerusalem and the Holy Land. With two million pieces of vividly coloured local stone, it depicts hills and valleys, villages and towns as far as the Nile Delta.

The Madaba Mosaic Map covers the floor of the Greek Orthodox Church of St. George which was built in 1896 AD, over the remains of a much earlier 6th century Byzantine church. The mosaic panel enclosing the Map was originally around 15.6 X 6m, 94 sq.m., only about a quarter of which is preserved.

Other mosaic masterpieces found in the Church of the Virgin and the Apostles and in the Archaeological Museum depict a rampant profusion of flowers and plants, birds and fish, animals and exotic beasts, as well as scenes from mythology and the everyday pursuits of hunting, fishing and farming.

We then proceeded to **Mount Nebo** - the place where Moses was granted a view of the Promised Land and truly the view from the summit is amazing - as one can look west toward Jericho and Bethlehem. Moses ascended Mount Nebo to view the Land of Israel, which God had said he would not enter, and to die there; he was buried in an unknown



valley location. A small Byzantine church was built there by early Christians, which has been expanded into a vast complex. It has ancient mosaics installed by Christians many centuries ago. During his visit to Jordan in 2000, the Late Pope John Paul II held a sermon.

From here our next halt was **Mövenpick Resort Petra** for a good night's rest. Arriving into the hotel I was impressed by its location – literally right across the road is the entrance to the historic city of Petra. This resort looks a little old fashioned from outside but that is compensated by the warmth of the staff.

On arrival post sunset, I caught up with the Hotel Manager, Rania Bawalsa. She informed that most of the 183 rooms and suites have been renovated to suit the modern necessities. The hotel has a wide variety of restaurants – we had dinner at the Al Saraya Restaurant that offers buffets for breakfast, lunch and dinner. But if you want scenic views and sunsets then opt for Al Ghadeer Roof Garden. After a hectic trip of Petra, the Al Baraka Tea Room, with its Lawrence of Arabia theme is ideal for the



afternoon tea. For the MICE the hotel has an Al Diwan meeting room which can accommodate up to 100 delegates.

(Watch out for our coverage on Petra, Wadi Rum, Aqaba and Jerash in the next issue)



In a freewheeling interview with **Bishara Sawalha, CEO Tania Tours** highlights what Indians can look out in Jordan. Excerpts

What are the most distinctive or unique features of Tania Tours?

Being passionate to attract people from all over the world to visit our beloved country Jordan and experience the destination starting my own travel agency was an ideal decision. Today we create new markets for visitors and pride ourselves in providing special and unique services to fit the needs of each and every one of our clients.

What should one plan to see in Jordan and what is the minimum time that you suggest?

Jordan is a country that can be compared to a museum full of surprises, history, antiquities, adventure, and beauty. We have one of the Seven Wonders of the World (Petra), the lowest point on Earth (The Dead Sea) and many more sites to visit for all types of visitors. Regardless of how many days you decide to stay you will have things to do and places to visit. Catering to all different budgets our packages start from \$500 per person.

Which is the best time to visit Jordan?

Our high seasons are March-June and September – February but that doesn't mean that the rest of the year isn't a good

time to visit. The summer temperatures range from 27 to 40 degrees Celsius which is considered low season. Our beautiful 4 season climate makes it ideal for all travel preferences.

Any specific marketing strategy to attract tourists, MICE and weddings from the Indian sub-continent?

The best ways to market Jordan are through social media, Media visits, bloggers, FAM trips (preferably for decision makers) and word of mouth. We highly believe in word of mouth marketing and the ripple effect because we are certain that we can provide a memorable stay to all our guests, this will in turn make them want to promote Jordan and Tania Tours. We believe continuous clear communication between us and the organizers in India is very important to help make the event run smoothly and hassle free

Indians love vegetarian food - would your agency be able to cater to them?

Yes we are capable of providing vegetarian food. We have contacted many hotels and restaurants to provide us with custom made vegetarian menus to suit the Indian market.

Being in the industry for so long how significantly has the role of a travel agent changed and any advice for new travel agents?

When we started our company 26 years ago all travel details were handled by a travel agent for all types of travelers but today travelers have the option of online booking which is taking over our role. Travel agents need to know tourism is a very competitive business to be in so you need to find your trademark, treat your partners like family, give every guest that visits a feeling of a home away from home and always try to exceed your guest's expectations.

Where do you see the company in the next five years?

Our 5 year plan will include expanding our brand more internationally and expanding more towards an online travel agency to give our "on the go" clients an easier and less time consuming way to book their travels.

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Further information:

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