

Petra leaves visitors star-struck

IAN STRAKER
Jordanian tourism officials have come up with a new way to leave those visiting Jordan's most famous tourist attraction star-struck.

The ancient Nabataean city of Petra, recently thrust into the international spotlight by being named one of the New Seven Wonders of the World, can also be viewed in regional star-light by tourists, thanks to the Petra by Night show, which has nighttime visitors follow lighted candles through a gorge leading to a site that flourished thousands of years ago, only to be abandoned and then rediscovered by a Swiss explorer in the mid-19th century, who subsequently brought word of it to the outside world.

Petra by Night visitors emerge – urged by site officials to “respect the silence” before beginning the trek to the site – from an imposing gorge to find themselves immediately in front of The Treasury, arguably



Petra, by day

Petra's most dramatic structure and which frequently appears in Jordanian tourism brochures, also partially illuminated by candles and the starry sky overhead.

A Bedouin musician then performs somewhat haunting sounding music for onlookers seated on the ground, with that performance followed by a flutist emerging from a darkened Treasury and performing while walking between the candles.

The visitors are then told of Bedouin lifestyles and history, with Bedouins long having lived in the region. And the show underscores one more way Jordan is capitalizing on the astonishing site of Petra, where visitors who work their way through the narrow gorge – just as Nabataeans, Romans and others did long ago – will find structure after structure literally carved from rock faces with incredibly skilful precision.

Indeed, The Treasury's remarkable appearance prompted filmmaker George Lucas to use it as the last refuge of the knight guarding the Holy Grail in the blockbuster movie *Indiana Jones and the Final Crusade*. The sprawling archaeological site serves as a huge tourist draw for Jordan.

“Petra is the icon,” declares Malia Asfour, director of the Jordanian Tourism Board North America.

But the Jordanian tourist guide Ibrahim Abdel-Haq says tourists who dream of viewing The Treasury shouldn't assume that it and other structures are laden with riches.

“Petra was a cemetery,” says Abdel-Haq, who adds that 90 per cent of its many structures were tombs or temples, with the original area inhabitants actually living outside the boundaries of what is now the archaeological site.

Nabataean, Greek, Roman and Egyptian influences can be found in Petra, he adds.

Among lodging options in the nearby town of Petra are two Movenpick Hotels & Resorts properties, one within easy walk-

ing distance of the archaeological site; another hotel with the catchy name of the Cleopetra Hotel; and the Taybet Zaman, designed in a fashion “that will transport you back to 19th-century rural Jordan.” The five-star Taybet Zaman is designed and decorated in a style recalling the Jordan of yesterday, but guests will find televisions and other amenities in their room, and the hotel has the likes of a restaurant, lounge, swimming pool, Turkish bath and shops. It can be reached by e-mailing reservation@taybetzaman.com.

Meanwhile, those who wish to view more of the Nabataeans' handiwork can also visit nearby Little Petra, which isn't quite as dramatic as its better-known cousin, but is still impressive nonetheless.

Egyptair considers service year-round from Canada

MIKE BUNNEN

The head of the Egyptian Tourist Authority in Canada says she's looking forward to year-round service from her national carrier, but Egyptair's senior executive here reveals that a decision on the matter won't be made until next winter.

Egyptair traditionally operates a twice-weekly, summer-only schedule between Montreal and Cairo that will this year run from the beginning of June to the end of September. The three-class, Airbus A-340 service will operate on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

“We are looking forward to year-round, non-stop Egyptair service,” says the authority's Nagwa Korashy. That's going to depend on the outcome of a study on whether to offer a 12-month

online service or rely instead on year-round Star Alliance codeshare flying, explains Yasser Hodhod, Egyptair's Montreal-based director general.

Outside the summer season, Egyptair co-operates with Air Canada and Lufthansa to offer codeshare flights to Cairo from all major Canadian airports through New York, London and Frankfurt.

The study is currently being conducted by Egyptair in co-operation with its Star Alliance colleagues. A decision on whether to go online for the winter of 2010-2011 will be made later this year, according to Hodhod.

It's understood that the final nod will depend to a large degree on the Egyptian carrier's long-haul equipment situation.

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