

Late deals

A two-bedroom cottage set in an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

SET in an elevated position and close to the Hillsborough Nature Reserve, Cornmill Cottage (sleeps four, plus cot for baby) is just a few minutes stroll from Hele Bay.

Available through Marsdens Cottage Holidays (01271 813 777; www.marsdens.co.uk) the two-bedroom cottage is situated just five-minutes drive from Watermouth Castle and the secluded harbour of Watermouth Cove. A week's stay, from March 25, now costs £223 (total) – a saving of £56.

Save 50 per cent on a last minute ski holiday

Tailor-made ski holiday specialists, Ski Power, still have a number of properties available for an end-of-season ski holiday.

For example, reduced by 50 per cent, Chalet Jonquille (sleeps 16) is set in the heart of La Tania, providing easy and quick

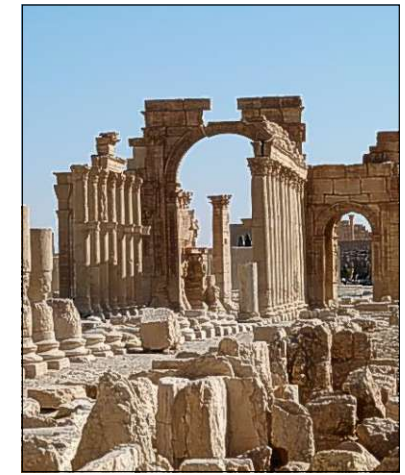
walking access to both the resort centre (2 mins) and the ski lifts (3 mins). A week's stay costs £320 pp (based on two sharing). Price includes flights (ex Gatwick), transfers and seven nights' catered chalet hotel accommodation (daily breakfast and a five-course evening meal six days a week). Call Ski Power on 01737 30 60 29 or visit www.skipower.co.uk

Enjoy a snow-sure family ski holiday this Easter

Specialist operator, Zenith Holidays (01737 852 242; www.zenithholidays.co.uk) is offering guests the chance to enjoy some fantastic glacier skiing in Austria this Easter.

A four-night stay at the Four-Star Hotel Bergjuwel from April 21, is just £530 pp (based on two adults and two children under 11 sharing). Prices includes flights (Gatwick) and transfers, four-nights' half-board accommodation and unlimited use of three wellness centres in the resort (facilities include sauna, steam room, pool).

The road to Damascus



Herald Express

Reader OFFER



From £649

DEPARTS 15, 28 JUN, 4 SEP 2011

Krakow, Zakopane & the High Tatras

7 nights from only £649

This two centre holiday offers a wonderful contrast: firstly the medieval university city of Krakow, home town of Chopin and Pope John Paul II. Our second centre is Zakopane which has a majestic setting amidst the Tatra Mountains and is a haven for skiers in winter, and walkers in summer.

The price includes:

- Return direct flights from Bristol
- 7 nights B&B hotel accommodation (3 in Krakow, 4 in Zakopane)
- Walking tours of Krakow and Zakopane, raft trip in the Dunajec gorge
- Services of a tour representative

For more information on this special offer call today!

0844 472 4617 Quote TORQ

0844 cost 5p per minute from a BT landline plus a connection fee of 10p. Offer operated by Preferred Travel Services, ATOL protected 5937. ABTA W8992, a company wholly independent of Northcliffe Media Limited. Prices are per person, from, and subject to finite availability. Conditions apply contact Preferred Travel Services. When you respond Northcliffe Media Ltd and other companies in the DMGT Group may contact you with offers/services that may be of interest. Please give your mobile or email details if you wish to receive such offers by SMS or email. We will not give your details to other companies without your permission, please let us know if you are happy for us to do so.



SQUATTING over a hole in a muddy, rubbish-strewn floor I grappled for a packet of tissues.

The room was lit by burning garbage held through a gaping hole in a door that was little more than a metal frame. I willed myself to be quicker so I could breathe without tasting the foul stench that filled the air.

Beyond the door was a dank, dingy corridor scattered with discarded paper and boxes. Outside a group of local Syrian men sold spit-roast chickens to passing motorists and villagers. The Oasis Overland truck was parked on the side of the road, our guide having negotiated the use of the toilet with the beaming stall holder.

I had arrived in Syria a few hours earlier and observed that the buildings lining the roads were simple and ramshackle but adorned with bright, garish neon lights. The driving was wildly erratic and the people seemed friendly.

This was the first roadside toilet stop in Syria and it was clear that the Oasis Overland truck, carrying 24 people who'd met for the first in Istanbul just over two weeks before, had left behind the comforts of the West and arrived in the Middle East.

Syria may not have developed apace with the western world, but the country's simplicity and lack of overblown commercialisation only adds to its appeal. The country's low profile as a travel destination made it the place I was most eager to visit during my six-week sojourn from Istanbul to Cairo with overland travel company Oasis.

The Arab Republic's unstable political past has left a cloud over its popularity among travellers. Yet the guide book assured me it is one of the safest places in the Middle East to travel.

We only stopped for a short time in Syria, but it was long enough for me to be impressed by this fascinating land with an immense historical wealth.

Its location at a geographic crossroads where ancient civilisations met and traded, has resulted in a history of permanent settlement going back 11,000 years and created a country shaped by diverse influences.

Syria's two main cities vie for the title of oldest constantly inhabited site in the world with Damascus and



Aleppo both able to demonstrate inhabitation for more than 8,000 years.

My first stop in Syria was the frantically paced second city of Aleppo.

The packed Oasis Overland itinerary meant we had just one day in the city. Nowhere near enough time to get to grips with it properly, but time enough for a guided tour of the main sights.

It was early morning and the old city was just coming to life as I passed under the great stone portal of gate Bab Antakya into the labyrinthine streets of the souq of the same name.

In a country that is yet to develop the concept large department stores this is where the locals do their shopping. It is arguably the most vibrant and untouristy in the Middle East and offered a fascinating insight into daily life.

Once the area came alive, Burqa-clad ladies meandered down the narrow streets picking up something for dinner, while uniformed university students with beautifully applied make-up and head scarves filled seats in cafes sharing a Shisha with friends. Male stall holders hollered at passing tourists trying to entice them into a purchase, and old

men sat at tables chain-smoking and playing traditional games.

The streets were awash with sounds, smells and colour assaulting my senses from all directions. It was impossible not to feel completely alive as I strolled along the ancient cobbled streets.

Exiting the bustling souq in the East I was confronted with the imposing citadel.

The impressive structure instantly asserts its dominance on the city, and was long the heart of its defences. It is thought the first fortifications were erected here in around 333 BC, but the natural mound on which the citadel stands was a place of worship long before that.

The guide took us on a whistle-stop tour of the edifice stopping at the battlements where it is possible to truly appreciate the massive expanse of the city stretching for miles in every direction.

In a flash, the trip had moved on and we found ourselves at place described by Lawrence of Arabia as the "finest castle in the world" – Krak des Chevaliers.

The completeness of the Crusader fort is staggering. It would barely have looked much different 800 years ago when it was given up by the Christians after their 200-year struggle for the Holy Land came to an end.

Krak's formidable proportions and intriguing craftsmanship are monumental. I could have spent hours absorbed in exploring the nooks and crannies of the fortress.

But we were whisked off for our first experience of sleeping under the stars at bush camp.

The Oasis truck bumped off-road across desert sand for about 15 minutes before we stopped and surveyed the baron panorama.

Disembarking, tour leader, Graham, pointed to the left: "Boys toilet over there," he commanded. "And girls over there," he said pointing to a dip in the landscape to the right. "Shovels are in the back of the truck make sure you bury your poo."

The facilities were basic – the bed was a roll-mat and sleeping-bag under the black sky. The location was markedly isolated; the sky twinkled with so many stars it appeared to be alive. It was a wonderfully peaceful place for a night in the open and the

perfect stop over before visiting the remote ancient city of Palmyra.

Palmyra is an archaic Arab commercial metropolis sprawling across 50 hectares of desert. Called Tadmor by the Arabs, Palmyra dates back to the second millennium BC and has now turned pink with age making the stonework look magnificent against a blue sky.

The solitude of the place was breathtaking and although we didn't have the place to ourselves, the flow of tourists was slow enough not to rob the area of its magic.

I could have lost hours, even days, wandering among the towering columns and exploring the vast area.

But the enchanting spell of Palmyra was somewhat broken after two girls on the trip, both exploring the site alone, had unpleasant experiences with local men. I wouldn't recommend female travellers take to the site alone, but still, it undoubtedly ranks with the Pyramids in Egypt as one of the must-see sights in the Middle East.

Our final stop in Syria was the capital city of Damascus, by far the country's largest municipality, with a population of more than 1.5 million.

It is a city of fascinating contrasts. Veiled women in traditional dress mix with Bedouin ladies and other city folk sporting western-style garb. The largely modern administrative and commercial district with its apparently lawless traffic lies beyond the timeless bazaars situated in the old town.

It is easy to loose yourself for hours wandering the rambling streets of the old town. The honking of horns is a constant accompaniment to the experience. Motorbikes and small trucks push their way through the narrow alleyways, forcing shoppers to flatten themselves against walls or scuffle into doorways to avoid the vehicles that rush through tiny gaps with just millimetres to spare.

Among the streets lies the Umayyad Mosque, the third most exalted site in Islam, and probably the most important building in Syria.

Unlike the cathedrals of Christian worship, mosques were never built to inspire awe or trepidation, instead they provide for spiritual needs. It was possible to experience the tranquillity of the building's inner sanctum as long as you were sufficiently covered, and robes were provided for this purpose.



The courtyard was ornately decorated with beautiful gold mosaics. It was full of people but still maintained an air of serenity. I found a corner and sat quietly soaking up the calming atmosphere.

It provided a rare opportunity to sit back and reflect on the charm of visiting a country that is still relatively unspoilt by the tourist dollar.

But Syria's relative obscurity can't last. It won't be long before flights previously bound for Turkey or Greece are landing on the hallowed soil and tourist offices begin to spring up everywhere.

I found that even a brief visit gives you a real feel for the opulent history and virile culture of the country.

If you want to see authentic Syria get there quickly before the hordes of tourists arrive.

JENNA RICHARDS

FactFile

Oasis Caravan Istanbul to Cairo Trip price from £695 with a local payment from £270.
Start Location: Istanbul
End Location: Cairo
Duration: 37 Days
This trip also runs in reverse from Cairo to Istanbul. Trips depart on various dates throughout the year for more information see www.oasisoverland.co.uk
Phone: 01963 363 400
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THE SIGHTS AND SOUNDS: Clockwise, from left, Aleppo's citadel; Krak des Chevaliers; the ancient city of Palmyra; Damascus old town; sleeping under the stars at Palmyra bush camp