

Late deals

FAMILY SKI HOLIDAY

IF YOU are looking for a last-minute ski break this half-term, specialist operator, Hundred Hills has the answer. Situated just a five-minute walk from the centre Tignes, the luxurious Chalet Ushuaia (sleeps 12) has been reduced by £150pp this February. A seven-night stay, departing February 19 now costs £660pp. The price is based on two adults and two children sharing two rooms and includes transfers and seven-nights' chalet board accommodation. Flights extra. For further information call Hundred Hills on 0191 406 6160, or visit www.hundredhills.com

SPRING SKI BREAK

Specialist operator, Zenith Holidays has a number of special offers available for those looking to enjoy a spring break on the slopes. For example, reduced by £135 pp is the traditional, six-bedroom, Chalet Ellen (sleeping 12) in Morzine. Part of the Portes du Soleil ski area, Morzine offers a vast array of ski territory and vibrant nightlife. A week's stay, from March 5, now costs just £350 pp. Based on two sharing, the price includes return Eurotunnel crossings and seven nights' catered chalet accommodation (daily breakfast, afternoon tea and a three-course evening meal with wine six days a week). Call Zenith Holidays on 01737 852 242 or visit www.zenithholidays.co.uk

VALENTINE'S GETAWAY

If you are looking to get away for a relaxing, romantic break on the Valentine's weekend, Marsdens Cottage Holidays still has a number of properties available. For example, Sand Dunes (sleeps four), is a two-bedroom, contemporary apartment, set just 500 yards

from Woolacombe beach. A three-night stay, starting February 12, is now just £195 (total) – reduced by £106 (was £301). Call Marsdens Cottage Holidays on 01271 813 777 or visit www.marsdens.co.uk for further information.

Herald Express **Reader OFFER**

From £599

DEPARTS APR - JUN, SEP & OCT 2011

Carcassonne Cathar Country and Catalonia

7 nights from only £599

Cathar country in Languedoc-Roussillon is a land of legend, mystery and stunning scenery. Solve the mystery of Rennes le Chateau and see the most complete medieval walled city in Europe. Based in Catalonia and in a pretty French spa town.

The price includes:

- Return direct flights from Bristol
- Seven nights HB accommodation (4 in France & 3 in Spain)
- Excursion to Carcassonne and Rennes-le-Chateau
- Free time in Figueras and Barcelona
- Services of a tour representative

NO SINGLE SUPPLEMENT ON SELECTED DEPARTURES

For more information on this special offer call today!

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Full of Eastern promise



Before the current affairs in Egypt took hold, Herald Express reporter JENNA RICHARD spent six weeks touring the Middle East

I WAS travelling alone for the first time, and I was undeniably terrified.

Clutching a ticket for a six-week overland trip through the Middle East accompanied by a truck full of strangers I couldn't help but wonder if I'd made a huge mistake?

I was thrust into a scenario reminiscent of reality TV show Big Brother (well-placed cameras would have captured some captivating footage). Twenty-four personalities came together for an adventure and experience you couldn't script.

The group were as varied and interesting as the destinations we visited.

From the utterly glamorous, always immaculate, 65-year-old Italian wine taster Luciana, who once when offered a biscuit on a long drive responded: "Oh, no thank you. I don't like calories!" To Elliott a 19-year-old British, yet to be published, writer who drank and smoked like a rock star and for some unfathomable reason wanted to be known for his stinking unwashed clothes.

Our transport was an ingeniously designed big yellow truck complete with open air area, personal lockers and U-shaped seating. The accommodation, much to the trepidation of some of my fellow travellers was, for the most part, a tent. Oasis Overland are well versed at running overland expeditions, with my six-week sojourn through Turkey, Syria, Jordan and Egypt being just one of the many trips they offer across three continents.

We were each allocated a job and we shared cooking duties on a rota basis – had this not been what I'd signed up for I might have been horrified. But the mundane duties; sweeping the truck (my personal job), putting up the tent and cooking for 24 turned out to be some of the most rewarding and character-building of the trip.

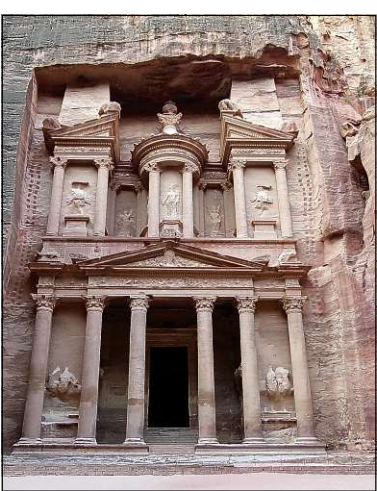
My fears of isolation at travelling alone were soon dispelled. As soon as the welcome meeting in an Istanbul hostel finished the alcohol flowed, a shisha was shared and the getting-to-know you began.

Graham, our British tour guide, and Colin, our Swedish driver, were knowledgeable, approachable and friendly. With my concerns evaporated and I was eager to get on, learn more about the people fate had placed me alongside, and see some of a fascinating part of the world.

Some of the earliest human civilisations were in the Middle East. It is a region with an interesting if chequered past and, in some places, an uncertain future – I never thought I'd find myself within 150km of Iraq!

Delving deeper into the history of the places I visited I was left gasping at the barely fathomable age of much of the region's ruins and antiquities.

Gazing at the colossal size of the Library of Celsus in Turkey's Ephesus



I was overwhelmed at intricate detail of the ancient Roman structure. It was real, I could touch it yet it was built in 125 AD, almost 2,000 years ago.

The awe-inspiring building was erected by the consul Julius Aquilla as a memorial to his father, Celsus Polemaenus, who is still entombed in one of the walls. Inside 12,000 scrolls were stored – it was one of the largest libraries of the ancient world – but all were burned by Goths in 262 AD.

The columns towered above me and sprawling behind me was the vast complex of the ancient city – one of the largest and best preserved in the Mediterranean – inhabited since the 10th century BC.

Moving on to Syria, we visited Aleppo and Damascus, two of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world, both with vibrant bustling Souks.

Damascus's main souk, al-Hamidiyah, is an elegant structure with a vaulted iron roof. It is riddled with bullet holes from machine guns fired by French aerial gunners during the nationalist rebellion of 1925; the tiny roof openings letting through fine beams of sunlight.

Inside the bazaar, the crowds almost carry you through the shop-lined walkway towards the Umayyad mosque – a magnificent religious structure with a history dating back 3,000 years.

The sights, smells and atmosphere of the souk are captivating and it is impossible not to lose yourself in the labyrinthine streets for hours on end.

Jordan's oldest city, Petra – described by John William Burgon in his 1845 poem as 'a rose red city half as old as time' – was another astounding feat of craftsmanship.

Entering the city I made my way through the naturally dramatic Siq gorge before being confronted by the 2,000-year-old Treasury. Carved deep into the rock face, I was struck by how

well it is preserved, its imposing beauty not diminished despite the passage of time. This iconic image of Petra has been immortalised as the setting for the climax of Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade.

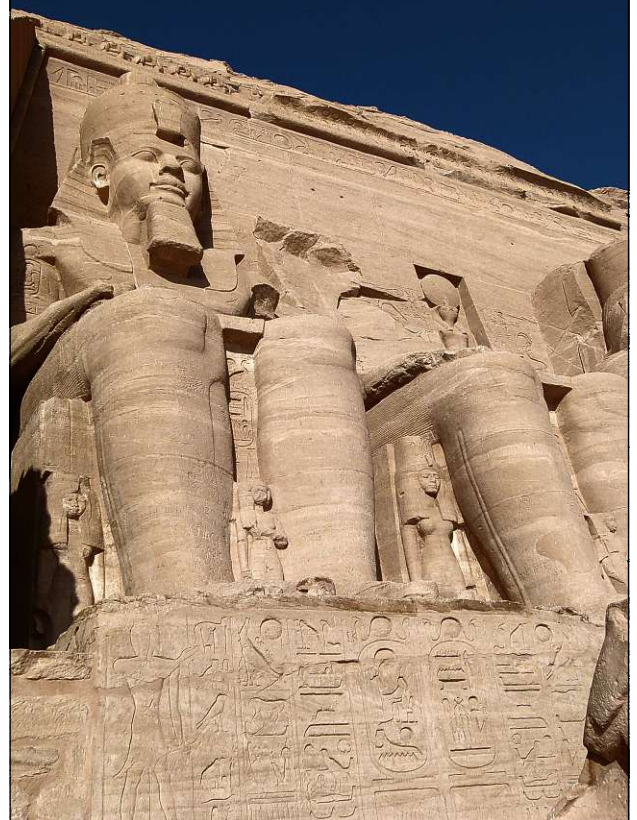
The natural drama of Petra is manifested throughout the vast landscape. Massive stone facades carved from beautifully coloured sandstone with the appearance of melted chocolate loom large as you explore the sprawling city remains. It easily takes a 10-hour day to wander around just the highlights, while marvelling at the ingenuity of an ancient people who skilfully carved their frontages from the top down.

But in Egypt a 3,000-year-old civilisation managed to achieve an engineering marvel much greater than building exquisitely impressive structures. At Abu Simbel, Ramses II had a temple built into the mountain that was precisely orientated so the sun's rays reached deep into the hillside and illuminated its sanctuary on his birthday and the anniversary of his coronation every year.

The temple was accurately aligned so on the prescribed days the spotlight would penetrate the door and shine on Amun-Re, Re-Herakhte and Ramses the god leaving the statue of Ptah, the god of the underworld, in the dark.

Outwardly the temple asserts itself on the landscape demonstrating the unabashed megalomania of its founder. The facade is dominated by four enthroned colossi of Ramses II. Your mind boggles at its daring conception and the logistics of its construction. It is a place that demands you stay longer to sit and appreciate just what the human race was capable of achieving more than 3,000 years ago.

The Middle East is a fascinating area, the history almost overwhelming. In the space of six weeks I'd seen and appreciated structures and places of an age I was barely able to comprehend.



THIS WEEK: Torquay Rotary's 90th Anniversary, Redcliffe Hotel, Paignton

■ CHEERS: From left, Beryl Durtmall, Alan Durtmall, Charles Blake, Madge Bell and Brian Davis

■ CUTTING THE CAKE: From left, Phillips Frier, Gerald Arnold, Carole Angliss and Brian Moulson

■ CONVERSATION: From left, Mike Evans, Derek Edwards and Johan Johansen

■ ABOVE LEFT: From left, Roger and Alison Avenall

■ ABOVE RIGHT: From left, from left, George and Margaret Taylor-Hamilton

■ CELEBRATIONS: From left, Graham Anker, Leueen Anker, Brian Bissell and Jennifer Bissell

■ MEETING UP: From left, Romy Owen and John Tibbetts

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