

An adventure in the footsteps of Tintin

Jordan's barren but breathtaking landscape is the backdrop for a series of tours based on the escapades of a cartoon hero which will soon be packing them in at the cinema. **Caroline Davison** went along for the ride

IT'S more than 50 years since Tintin, the cub reporter and cartoon character who has since become one of Belgium's best-loved exports, first set foot in Jordan with his faithful lieutenants Captain Haddock and Snowy the dog. His adventures there provide the backdrop for a film to be released next year by Steven Spielberg and co-director Peter Jackson, who has the task of digitally animating Spielberg's live footage. The star cast will include Jamie Bell as Tintin, Daniel Craig as Red Rackham and Andy Serkis as Captain Haddock. Of course, Jordan tourist wallahs can hardly believe their luck. One tour operator, On The Go Tours, has won the backing of Moulinsart (holder of the rights to the Tintin adventures) to start guided adventure tours taking in the Wadi Rum desert, the Dead

Sea, the Red Sea and Petra, and I was lucky enough to experience an early taste of what visitors can expect. The local agent collected us at Jordan's capital, Amman, with a comfy 25-seat coach and a

cool box – a wonderful forethought in this sweltering country.

Our first port of call was the Dead Sea, and en route we spotted the twinkling city lights of Jerusalem. Our four-star hotel overlooking the beach was clean and spacious with welcoming staff. Only a few hotels have sprung up to cash in on this coastline's beauty.

Here, say the Gospels, John the Baptist baptised Jesus, and on the Dead Sea shore the complexity of the Middle

East's problems come into dramatic focus.

On the left across the water is Israel. On the right is Palestine. Jordan recognises Palestine as the same state so its citizens are free to cross the border at will. Those who travel to Israel need a passport, and another visa to return to Jordan.

Buffet breakfast next morning was such an interesting mix of British, continental and Jordanian fare, including pastries and yoghurt-like labaneh, that I expected to

become the first person to sink in the sea's salty water. Floating in the Dead Sea is a surreal experience. It's so salty that cuts sting like fury on entry into the water, but once you lie back and shut your eyes it's glorious.

I washed back to the shore like flotsam after keeping my eyes shut for a bit too long, which gave me an incentive to cover myself in Dead Sea mud,



provided free on the beach. The idea is to cake on the paste, let it dry in the sun, then wash it off in the sea. It's

said to be very effective in treating skin conditions and making bathers silky smooth. Certainly my skin felt great and after a few more floating sessions in the sea we headed towards Little Petra, our next stop.

Dropped off in the hills a few miles from the hotel, we found beautiful Arabian horses waiting to transport us the final distance. Guides led us along the Al Hasanat path and two hours later we stopped for a glass of sweet black tea which replenished our energy levels to complete the journey to the hotel.

Before bed, Tintin expert Michael Farr gave a fascinating talk about the life and times of the character's creator, Belgian cartoonist Herge.

The next day it was off to the Unesco heritage site of Petra – the Rose City. Featured in the Tintin story Red Sea Sharks, it's well known as the place where the Holy Grail is guarded in Spielberg's Indiana Jones And The Last Crusade. After walking just over a mile through a winding dry gorge, we emerged between the rock faces to the sight of the

Treasury, Petra's most elaborate ruin which is hewn into a sandstone cliff. Experts believe the structure was built in the Nabataean era and was used in ancient times as a tomb, then later as a temple.

American archaeologist Christopher Tuttle, of Brown University, explained that only 2% of the area has been excavated so far, but threats from the elements mean it is best to dig slowly to preserve artefacts and buildings. This fascinating glimpse of a past civilisation makes Petra a

unique and enchanting place. Visitors at night have the entrancing sight of a valley lit entirely by candles.

Tiring on the walk back in the blistering heat, I paid for a ride in a horse-drawn cart before jumping back into the minibus for the ride to the desert – the section of the tour I had most looked forward to.

Wadi Rum didn't disappoint. Dropped off at the edge of the desert, we boarded a jeep to get into the heart of the landscape, passing sand dunes and camel herders. The area is

peaceful, relaxing and breathtakingly beautiful.

Our accommodation – a luxury tent – came complete with proper bed, furniture and carpet. The romantic setting was enhanced as our group climbed to the top of a boulder to watch the sun set while sipping sweet tea.

The tent-dwelling Bedouin made splendid hosts, cooking chicken in an underground oven and entertaining us with traditional music as the stars came out in force. A magical evening.

To return to civilisation, we relied on camels, even though some derrieres were still recovering from the horses.

Three hours later we were nearly back at the edge of the desert when my camel suddenly lurched forward to bite the one in front, sending it cantering into the distance. Cue raucous laughter.

We caught up with it some time later as we prepared to return by minibus to Amman for our final night.

At the restaurant recommended by our guide we were greeted by a wonderful meze selection that included

pitta, humous, salad, peppers, dips, cheeses and meats – and that was just the starter.

The full Tintin tour also includes two days at the Red

Sea, with a boat trip to the Pharaon Islands and the chance of snorkelling. There's also a free day to relax before

transferring to Amman for the journey home.

No doubt the Spielberg film will be wonderful – but it won't match the thrill of retracing Tintin's route across Jordan. This ultimate adventure promises memories to last forever.

TRAVEL FACTS

■ Caroline Davison was a guest of On The Go Tours which offers holidays to Jordan from six to 11 days, including the dedicated Tintin tour of Jordan and the Rose City.

■ Prices for the Tintin tour from February 2011 start at £2,029, which includes six nights at four/five star and heritage hotels, one night's B&B at Wadi Rum desert camp, one lunch, three evening meals, return flights into Amman, transfers, all transport and activities.

■ For Glasgow departures, add connecting flights from around £80.

■ Some tours are dedicated family tours, and some include a Tintinologist.

■ Reservations: 020 7371 1113 and www.onthegotours.com



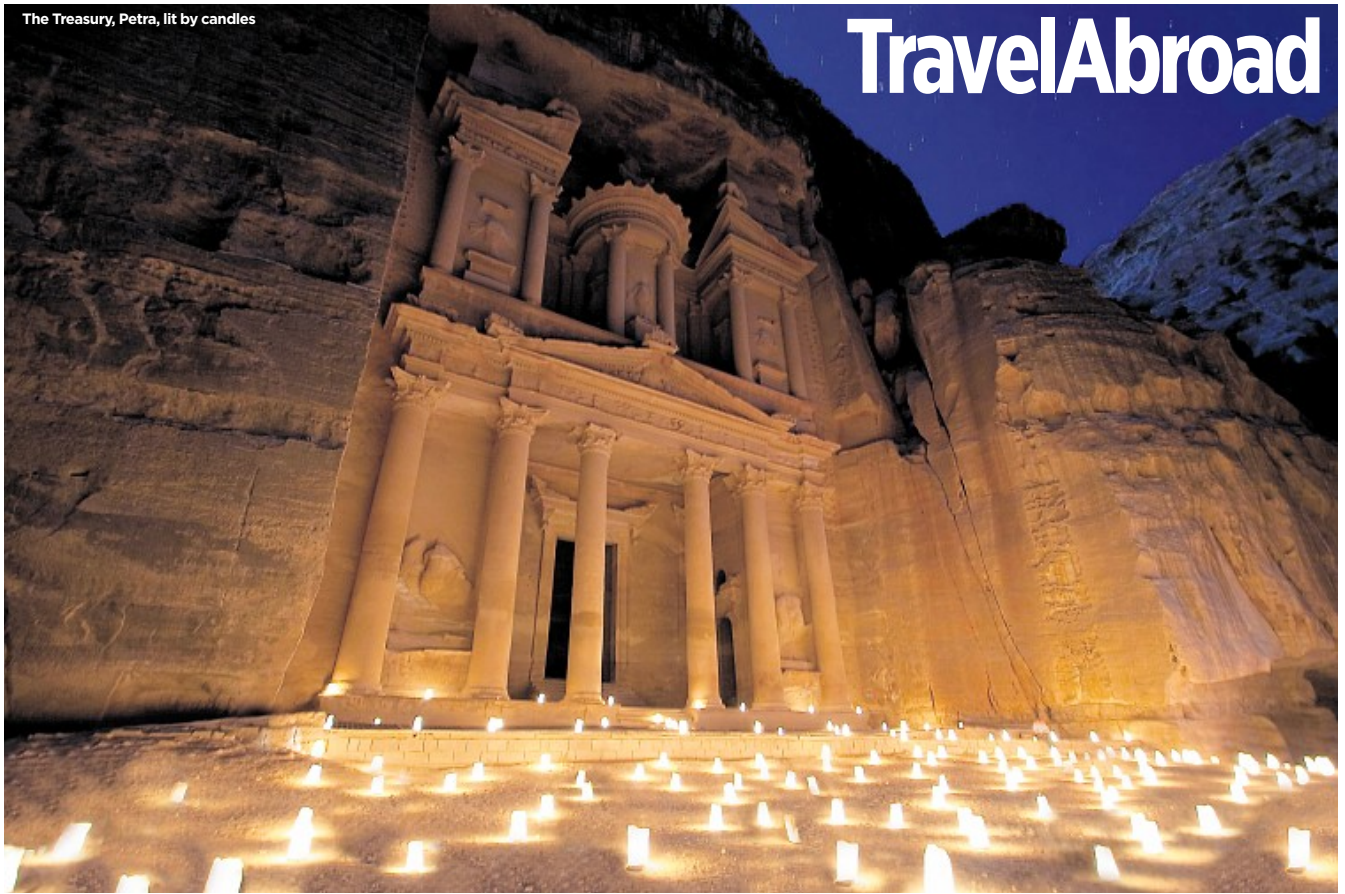


Kick back and relax in the Dead Sea



A scene from
Tintin in Jordan





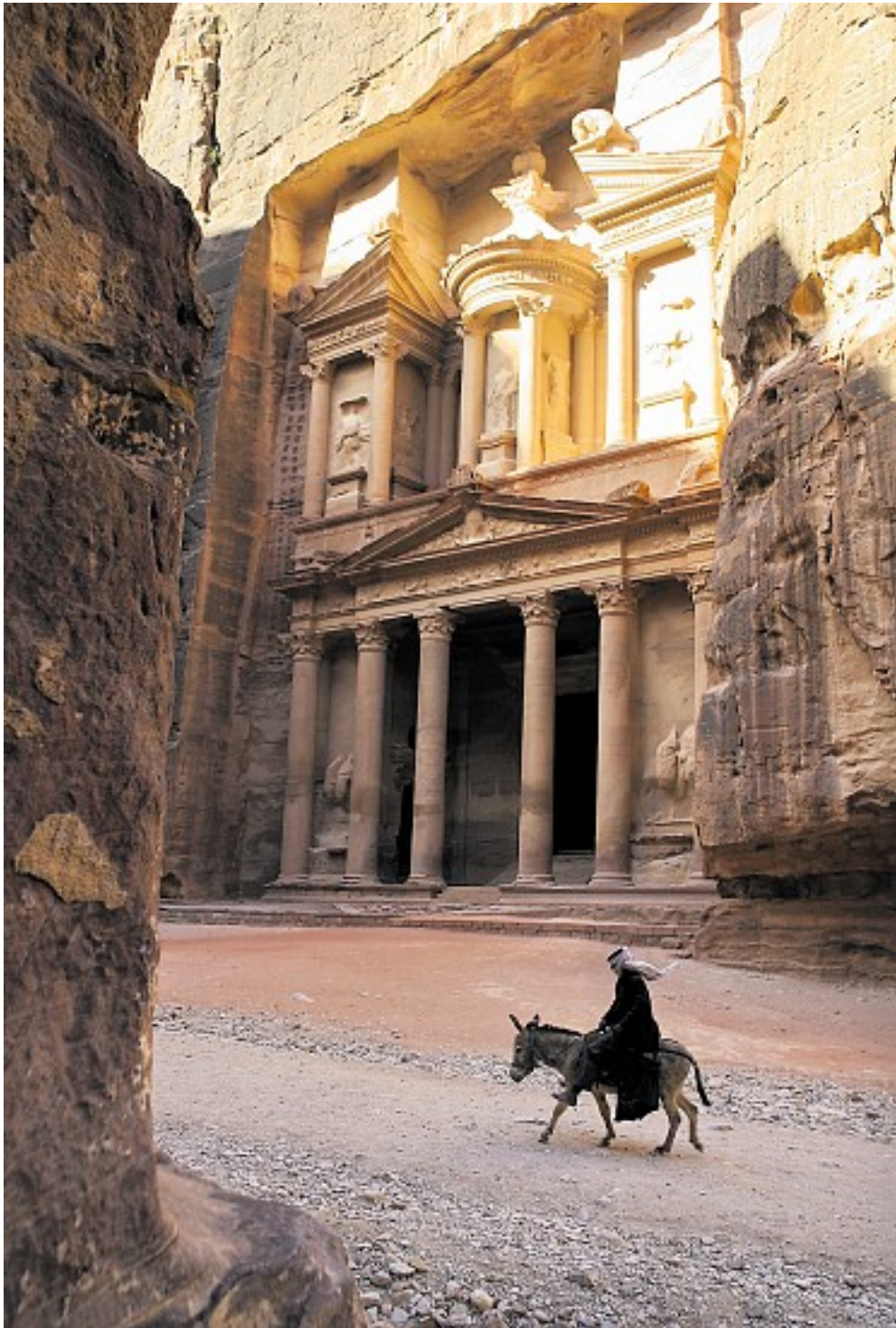


Above: the dramatic rocks at Petra



Right: Dead Sea mud is said to be great for the skin





Sunset at the Treasury





The Treasury as seen in
Tintin in Jordan

