

Getting Started

Apart from a few logistical matters, your pretrip planning will consist of the pleasurable pastimes of tracking down a great read, surfing the Net to learn other travellers' tales and the odd trip to your video store to find classic Middle Eastern movies. Most types of journey are possible regardless of your budget and can range from the highly active (see p638) to lazing by the sea. To whet your appetite and to survey possible routes, see p27.

Two issues to be aware of involve the thorny question of visas. Read carefully the information about Israeli visa stamps (see p353) and entering Libya on an organised tour (p503), and make the necessary advance preparations to avoid finding yourself at a border and being unable to cross it.

WHEN TO GO

When planning a trip to the Middle East, the two main things to bear in mind are the weather and the religious holidays.

Climate

Most of the Middle East is best visited in autumn and spring (September to November and March to May). December and January can be fairly bleak and overcast everywhere in the region; even in southern Egypt and Libya night-time desert temperatures can be bitterly cold. Unless you're an avid sun-worshipper or water-sports freak, the summer months of June through to September should definitely be avoided – it's just too hot to do anything. In July and August visitors to the Pharaonic sites at Aswan and Luxor in Egypt are obliged to get up at 5am to beat the heat and don't even think of an expedition into the Libyan Sahara at this time.

There are exceptions. The northeast of Turkey before May or after mid-October can be beset by snow, perhaps even enough to close roads and mountain passes. Parts of Syria and northern Iran also suffer from miserable weather between November and March or April.

Religious Holidays & Festivals

Although non-Muslims are not bound by the rules of fasting during the month of Ramadan, many restaurants and cafés throughout the region will be closed and those who are fasting can be understandably taciturn, transport is on a go-slow and office hours are erratic to say the least. If you're visiting Turkey, you may also want to avoid Kurban Bayramı, which lasts a full week. Hotels are jam-packed, banks closed and transport booked up weeks ahead. Iran also has a couple of festivals to avoid including Moharram, the month of mourning, and the Persian New Year celebrations, while in Israel and the Palestinian Territories quite a few religious holidays, such as Passover and Easter, cause the country to fill up with pilgrims, prices to double and public transport to grind to a halt.

On the positive side, it's worth trying to time your visit to tie in with something like Eid al-Adha (the Feast of Sacrifice, which marks the Prophet's pilgrimage to Mecca) or the Prophet's Birthday, as these can be colourful occasions. See p647 for further details.

COSTS & MONEY

Libya, Lebanon and Israel and the Palestinian Territories aside, travel in the Middle East is cheap; the travel staples – accommodation, meals and transport (apart from flying) – are, thankfully, usually the cheapest items

of your trip, although opportunities abound for spending a little more and travelling in considerable comfort.

If you're on a tight budget, stay at cheap hotels with shared bathrooms, eat street food and carry a student card with you to reduce entry fees at museums, you could easily get by on around US\$10 to US\$15 a day. Staying in comfortable midrange hotels, eating at quality restaurants to ensure a varied diet, the occasional private taxi ride and some shopping will push your daily expenses up to between US\$30 and US\$50. In Lebanon, US\$20 a day is the barest minimum, while US\$40 is more realistic. In Israel and the Palestinian Territories, budget travellers could keep things down to US\$35 per day if they really tried hard, while a more comfortable journey would require up to US\$60. Libya, the land of organised tours, can be done on the cheap (ie by staying in youth hostels and travelling in a large group), but can cost up to US\$80 per day including good hotels and 4WD hire.

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

Ensure that you have the requisite vaccinations (p673) and visas (p653) before departure. Remember that anyone carrying an Israeli passport or an Israeli stamp in their passport will be denied entry to Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Libya. Travel insurance (p648) is strongly advised. If you're planning to drive, don't forget your licence and if you're bringing your own car make sure you get all the necessary documentation together (p662).

Other recommended items:

- basic medical kit
- mosquito repellent
- sleeping bag
- sunglasses, hat and sunscreen (as essential in the Sahara as on the beach)
- torch (flashlight) and spare batteries
- eight to 10 passport-sized photos for visas (if you plan to visit a number of countries and plan to obtain visas while there)
- Swiss Army knife with a bottle and/or can opener in case you buy a drink from a supermarket and want to actually drink it
- alarm clock (for early morning departures)
- universal washbasin plug
- washing powder and length of cord for drying clothes
- sanitary towels or tampons
- condoms
- toilet paper
- photocopies of your important documents (and leave a copy somewhere safe back home)
- a good book or 10 (the Middle East's night-time entertainment, or the absence thereof, may mean plenty of quiet nights in)
- a small size-three football (a great way to meet local kids and their families)
- a small sewing kit (useful for emergency repairs to backpacks stretched to bursting by souvenir shopping)
- a small cool pack (drinks are all much cheaper – and warmer – in supermarkets)
- a sense of perspective – persistent shopkeepers are just trying to make a living and can actually be nice people
- patience – most things do run on time, but the timetable may be elusive to the uninitiated
- an open mind

For more details on weather conditions, see the Climate section in each individual country chapter and p644.

'Travelling with a mixture of travellers cheques, cash and credit cards is the easiest way to stay liquid in the Middle East.'

When estimating your own costs, take into account extra items such as visa fees (which can top US\$50 depending on where you get them and what your nationality is), long-distance travel, and the cost of organised tours or activities, such as camel trekking, snorkelling or diving. And remember, some of the best travel experiences cost nothing: whiling away the hours taking on the locals in backgammon in Damascus, sleeping under the desert stars in the Sahara or watching the sun set over the Mediterranean.

More details of costs are given under the Money section in the Directory of each individual country chapter.

Travelling with a mixture of travellers cheques (relatively easy to replace and widely accepted), cash (super convenient) and credit cards (even more convenient, but of no use in Iran and little use in Libya) is the wisest way to stay liquid in the Middle East.

READING UP

Books

Lonely Planet has numerous guides to the countries of the Middle East, including *Egypt*, *Iran*, *Turkey*, *Libya*, *Jordan*, and *Syria & Lebanon*. There is also a city guide to *Istanbul*, a World Food guide to Turkey, and phrase-books for Egyptian Arabic, Farsi, Hebrew and Turkish.

In *From the Holy Mountain*, William Dalrymple skips lightly but engagingly across the region's landscape of sacred and profane, travelling through Turkey, Syria and Israel and the Palestinian Territories in what could be an emblem for your own journey.

East is West, *Valleys of the Assassins*, and *Beyond the Euphrates*, by Freya Stark, are elegantly written accounts of Stark's intrepid 1930s journey through Persia. They are full of insight and highly sympathetic to the people and traditions of the region.

Travels with a Tangerine, by Tim Mackintosh-Smith, captures a modern journey in the footsteps of Ibn Battuta, a 13th-century Arab Marco Polo. It begins in Morocco and takes in several countries of the Middle East.

Eastward to Tartary: Travels in the Balkans, the Middle East, and the Caucasus, by Robert Kaplan, is confronting and occasionally sweeping in its generalisations, but the hard-headed narrative on Turkey, Syria and Iran will get you thinking.

The distinguished Islamic studies scholar CWR Long brings to life the people and history of most Middle Eastern countries, including, unusually, Libya, in *Bygone Heat: Travels of an Idealist in the Middle East*.

Bad Moon Rising: a Chronicle of the Middle East Today, by Gilles Kepel, is a master work by one of Islam's most compelling analysts. The scholar charts the history of radical Islam and its relationship with the West.

Websites

For specific country overviews, the lowdown on travel in the region and hundreds of useful links head to Lonely Planet's website (www.lonelyplanet.com), including the Thorn Tree, Lonely Planet's online bulletin board.

The following websites are an excellent way to get information about the Middle East.

Al-Bab (www.al-bab.com) Arab-world gateway that covers the entire Arab world with links to dozens of news services, country profiles, travel sites, maps, profiles, etc. A fantastic resource.

Al-Bawaba (www.albawaba.com) A good mix of news, entertainment and yellow pages directories, with everything from online forums to kids' pages.

Al-Mashriq (www.almashriq.hiof.no) A terrific repository for cultural information from the Levant (Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, Turkey). Some of the information is a bit stale but its articles, ranging from ethnology to politics, are hard to beat.

Arabnet (www.arab.net) Excellent Saudi-run online encyclopedia of the Arab world, collecting together news and articles plus links to further resources organised by country.

BBC News (www.news.bbc.co.uk) Follow the links to the Middle East section for comprehensive and excellent regional news that's constantly updated.

Great Buildings Online (www.greatbuildings.com) Download then explore digital 3D models of the Pyramids and Istanbul's Aya Sofya, plus lots of other info and images of monuments throughout the Middle East.

MUST-SEE MOVIES

Lawrence of Arabia (1962) may be clichéd and may give TE Lawrence more prominence than his Arab companions, but David Lean's epic is a masterpiece that captures all the hopes for freedom and subsequent frustrations for the Arabs in the aftermath of WWI.

Arab Palestine (1948), directed by Mohammed Bakary, can be hard to find, but stands out because it contains conversations between Palestinians and Jewish settlers and is far more balanced than most films of its era.

Chronicle of a Disappearance (1996), by the Palestinian director Elie Suleiman, captures the despair and courageous survival of Palestinians living under occupation and its atmospheric sense of place is richly evocative of modern Palestine.

Secret Ballot (2001), by Babak Payami, is unrivalled in conjuring up the contradictions between revolutionary and democratic Iran by one of the country's most promising directors.

Yol (1982), by Yilmaz Guney, is epic in scale but at the same time allows the humanity of finely rendered characters to shine through as five Turkish prisoners on parole travel around their country.

FAVOURITE FESTIVALS & EVENTS

In addition to the various religious and national holidays (p647) common to all Middle Eastern countries, each country has its own festivals that can celebrate everything from classical Arabic music to the many and varied uses for the humble camel. For a full rundown, see the Directory section of each individual country chapter, but in the meantime, here are some of our favourites that you may want to factor in when planning your trip.

Arabic Music Festival (Cairo, Egypt) A sophisticated 10-day celebration of classical, traditional and orchestral Arabic music held in November.

Baalbek Festival (Baalbek, Lebanon) One of the Middle East's most famous arts festivals held against the backdrop of towering Roman ruins in July and August.

Bereshet Festival (Megiddo Forest, Israel) This Bohemian gathering in September in the spiritual Megiddo Forest won't be to everyone's taste, but it boasts lots of live music and plenty of hedonism.

Bosra Festival (Bosra, Syria) Festival of music and theatre held in the town's spectacular Roman amphitheatre every second September or October in odd years.

Ghadames Festival (Ghadames, Libya) Excellent desert festival in October set in the enchanting ghost town of one of the Sahara's most significant oases with celebrations of traditional culture and weddings.

Istanbul International Music Festival (Istanbul, Turkey) Concerts are held in a wide variety of venues, including Aya Irini Kilisesi, in June and July.

Jerash Festival (Jerash, Jordan) Stunning setting in ancient Roman city for performances by local and overseas artists and displays of traditional handicrafts in July and August.

Mevlana Festival (Konya, Turkey) Ideal introduction to the whirling dervishes in one of their most important strongholds. Held from 10 to 17 December.

Nitaq Festival (Cairo, Egypt) Downtown Cairo's excellent arts festival with two weeks of exhibitions, theatre, poetry and music at galleries, cafés and a variety of other venues. Held in February or March.

Palmyra Festival (Palmyra, Syria) Another spectacular set amid Roman ruins, this popular folk festival, held in the desert in April and May, promises everything from camel races to music and dance performances.

West Beirut (1998) is Ziad Doueiri's powerful meditation on the scars and hopes of Christian and Muslim Lebanese, set against the backdrop of Lebanon's civil war about which there are few so superbly crafted films.

Nina's Tragedies (2005), by Savi Gabizon, begins with a Tel Aviv army unit telling a family that their son has been killed in a suicide bombing and ends with a disturbing but nuanced look at the alienation of modern Israel as it struggles for peace.

RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL

Tourism may have the potential to change for the better the relationship between the Middle East and the West, but the gradual erosion of traditional life is mass tourism's flipside. Sexual promiscuity, public drunkenness among tourists and the wearing of unsuitable clothing are all of concern. Please try to keep your impact as low as possible and create a good precedent for those who follow you by following the following tips:

- Don't hand out sweets or pens to children on the streets, since it encourages begging. Similarly, doling out medicines can encourage people not to seek proper medical advice. A donation to a project, health centre or school is a far more constructive way to help.
- You can do more good by buying your snacks, cigarettes, bubble gum etc from the enterprising grannies trying to make ends meet rather than state-run stores. Also use locally owned hotels and restaurants and buy locally made products.
- Try to give people a balanced perspective of life in the West. Try also to point out the strong points of the local culture – strong family ties, comparatively low crime etc.
- Make yourself aware of the human-rights situation, history and current affairs in the countries you travel through.
- If you're in a frustrating situation, be patient, friendly and considerate. Never lose your temper as a confrontational attitude never goes down well and for many Arabs a loss of face is a serious and sensitive issue. If you have a problem with someone, just be polite, calm and persistent.
- Try to learn some of the standard greetings (p679) – it will make a very good first impression.
- Ask before taking close-up photos of people. Don't worry if you don't speak the language – a smile and gesture will be appreciated.
- Don't pay to take a photo of someone and don't photograph someone if they don't want you to. If you agree to send someone a photo, make sure you follow through on it.
- Be respectful of Islamic traditions and don't wear revealing clothing; loose lightweight clothing is preferable.
- Try not to waste water. Switch off lights and air-con when you go out.
- When visiting historical sites, consider the irreparable damage you inflict upon them when you climb to the top of a pyramid, or take home an unattached artefact as a souvenir.
- Resist the local tendency of indifference to littering.

For more specific advice, see Responsible Diving (p639) and Responsible Hiking (p640). For information on the etiquette of visiting mosques, see Mosques Not to Be Missed (p67).

A British organisation called **Tourism Concern** (☎ 020-7133 3330; www.tourismconcern.org.uk; Stapleton House, 277-281 Holloway Rd, London N7 8HN) is primarily concerned with tourism and its impact upon local cultures and the environment. It has a range of publications and contacts for community organisations, as well as advice on minimising the impact of your travels.

'Try to learn some of the standard greetings – it will make a very good first impression.'

Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

ISTANBUL TO CAIRO

Two Months

From that first moment in sophisticated **Istanbul** (p563), you know you're in for a fabulous ride. Cut through central Turkey to marvel at the otherworldly landscapes of **Cappadocia** (Kapadokya; p610) that seem to have sprung from a wonderfully childlike imagination.

For some, the Middle East starts at the Syrian border, just across which lies the enchanting city of **Aleppo** (p535). **Damascus** (p510) is incomparable, home to labyrinthine markets, hospitable people and a wealth of historical associations. Pass through **Amman** (p364) and on to **Jerusalem** (p283), a city like no other. Further south again, the extraordinary rose-red ruins of **Petra** (p389) lie hidden amid stunning rocky mountains, and are so well preserved that they leave you feeling as if the ancient Nabataeans must not be far away. **Wadi Rum** (p393) boasts beautiful rock formations, orange sand and Bedouin companions to guide the way. From **Aqaba** (p395), make your way across the Red Sea bound for **Cairo** (p96), which is everything you dreamed the Middle East would be.



On the route from Istanbul to Cairo (around 4000km) allow two to 2½ weeks for Turkey, 10 days in Syria, one week in Jordan, at least a week in Israel and the Palestinian Territories and another week in Cairo.

ESFAHAN TO ISTANBUL

With Esfahan as your base, you'll need two weeks to enjoy Yazd, Shiraz and Persepolis. Allow a week to get to the Turkish border and another to Istanbul. The 3900km journey can be done in three weeks if you keep up a cracking pace and don't stray from the path.

Three to Four Weeks

The great overland journeys may be a thing of the past for all but the most hardy of travellers, but that doesn't mean you can't do a large (and, some would say, the best) chunk of it. **Esfahan** (p211) is like a Silk Road dream, home to dazzling blue-tiled architecture and teahouses spanning the river, reminiscent of *The Thousand and One Nights*. Esfahan also makes a great launching pad from which to explore other highlights of central and southern Iran, not least among them the mud-brick wonders of **Yazd** (p217) with its mazelike old town; the agreeable city of **Shiraz** (p221) with its pleasure gardens and fine mosques; and the antique city of **Persepolis** (Takht-e Jamshid; p225) where ancient Persia comes alive.

Tehran (p186) may not be the Middle East's most appealing metropolis, but it's a fascinating place and stands at the heart of modern Iran's struggle between Islamic conservatism and the country's liberal future; it has more than enough to keep you occupied for a few days.

As you head for Turkey, the historical resonance of **Tabriz** (p201) warrants an overnight stay. It's a long way east to the bright lights of modern Turkey, but don't fail to linger in enchanting little **Van** (p622) with its island church. Perhaps also detour north for a view of **Mt Ararat** (p621), thought by some to be the final resting place of Noah's Ark. The road to **Istanbul** (p563) – the one-time Constantinople and the place where Europe meets the Middle East – is long and lonely, but en route, you'll pass through dramatic landscapes and plenty of roads leading off to detours that you won't want to miss.



THE HEART OF THE MIDDLE EAST

One Month

The countries that lie at the heart of the Middle East – Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian Territories – will be well known to you from the news. Now it's time to discover what they're really like. **Beirut** (p417), the one-time 'Paris of the Middle East', is recovering its sophistication with elegant architecture, outdoor cafés by the Mediterranean and a fascinating social and religious mix of people. Beyond Beirut, Lebanon crams a lot in, with living history in **Byblos** (Jbail; p434), wonderful souqs in **Tripoli** (Trablous; p437), and evocative ruins from **Tyre** (Sour; p446) in the deep south to **Baalbek** (p451) in the Bekaa Valley.

Just across the border into Syria, **Damascus** (p510) is a glorious, hospitable city that at least one Lonely Planet author never wanted to leave. **Aleppo** (p535) is similarly friendly and enchanting and a base for visiting the wonderfully situated **Qala'at Sama'an** (p544). The Jordanian capital of **Amman** (p364) can feel like an oasis and also makes a great base for exploring astonishing **Petra** (p389) and the solitude of **Wadi Rum** (p393).

Across the Jordan River, **Jerusalem** (p283) is where so much Middle Eastern history is written and it's so beguiling and loaded with significance that it can be difficult to believe you're actually there. From there, your ability to visit the biblical towns of **Bethlehem** (p339) and **Jericho** (p338) will depend entirely on the prevailing security situation. **Tel Aviv** (p297) is a lively place to let your hair down at the end of the journey, a chance to discover the other side of Israeli life that you rarely hear anything about. The world-class ruins of **Caesarea** (p313) and timeless **Akko** (p313) are worth as much time as you can give them.



A week in each country will have you moving but the distance between sights is rarely long in this compact corner of the Middle East. In total you'll cover about 2500km. Leave Israel to last unless you want to be turned back at the Syrian or Lebanese borders.

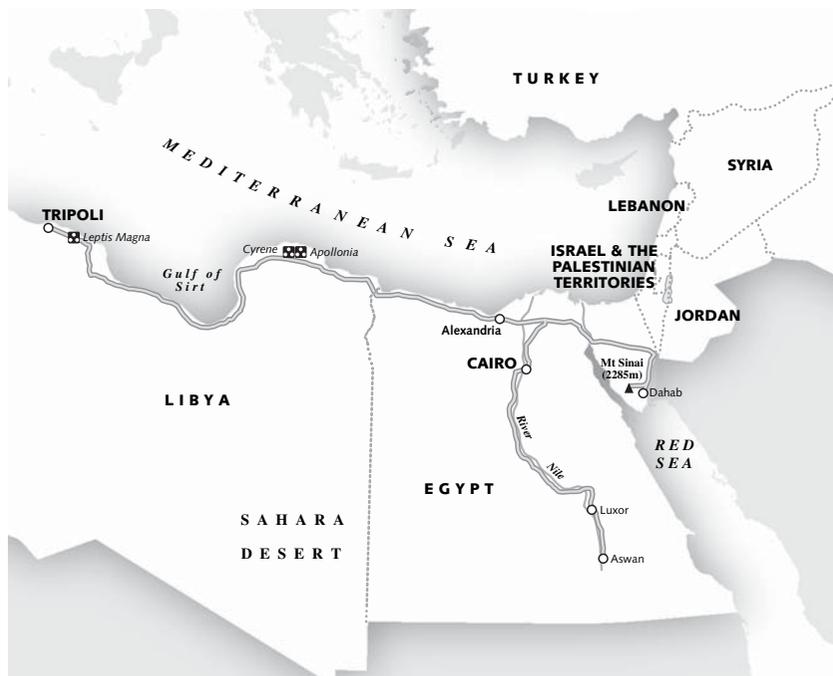
EGYPT & LIBYA

One to Two Months

If you've already been on the road for a while, don't miss **Dahab** (p162), a travellers' hang-out, divers' paradise and one of the great places to rest from life on the Middle Eastern road. While there, schedule in an early morning climb to the summit of **Mt Sinai** (p167), which would be a glorious place to watch the sunrise even if Moses didn't bring down the Ten Commandments from here. They don't call **Cairo** (p96) the 'Mother of the World' for nothing. This crossroads of the Middle East and Africa has an endless capacity to surprise and is as at ease with its hip, young Egyptian middle class as with the age-old **Pyramids of Giza** (p106). Spend as long as you can making your way down the Nile and back up again, reserving most of your days for slow felucca trips to connect you with **Luxor** (p124) and **Aswan** (p137) – nowhere has the world of the pharaohs been so lovingly preserved.

After returning to Cairo, make your way up to **Alexandria** (p117), the height of Egyptian and Mediterranean chic, before following the coast all the way to Libya. Now you've left the crowds behind, allowing you to explore the evocative Graeco-Roman-Byzantine ruins of **Apollonia** (p488) and **Cyrene** (Shahat; p487), which perch by the Mediterranean like sentinels to another age. Further west, **Leptis Magna** (p479) is probably the finest Roman city still standing, while **Tripoli** (p471) buzzes with an outstanding medina, world-class museum and atmosphere that will make you wonder why you took so long to come here.

Egypt and Libya deserve a month each, but if you're pressed for time, count on three weeks for Egypt and 10 days to make your way across the Libyan coast. Remember to have your Libyan visa sorted well before you leave home. This route covers 4360km.



ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

THE MIDDLE EAST GRAND TOUR

Two Months

Most travellers who pass through the Middle East will visit many of the region's stand-out highlights, but how many can claim to have seen them all? Start in **Bam** (p234), then on to **Kerman** (p231), home to a fine bazaar and one of the region's premium teahouses. Mud-brick **Yazd** (p217), leafy **Shiraz** (p221) and ancient **Persepolis** (p225) should all be on your itinerary as you head for **Esfahan** (p211), one of the world's most beautiful cities.

Load up your backpack and steel yourself for the long journey ahead – en route to Turkey stop in **Tehran** (p186) or **Van** (p622), but keep going until you reach the improbable landscapes of **Cappadocia** (p610). Circle up to **Istanbul** (p563), down past **Ephesus** (p588) and the Mediterranean village of your choice – **Marmaris** (p593) is one highlight. You'll soon find yourself passing through some of the greatest cities in the world – **Aleppo** (p535), **Damascus** (p510), **Beirut** (p417) and **Jerusalem** (p283). **Petra** (p389) and **Wadi Rum** (p393) will leave you wondering how Jordan crams so much into such a small space. Dive the Red Sea at **Dahab** (p162) before forging on to **Cairo** (p96), the wonders of Ancient Egypt at **Luxor** (p124) and **Aswan** (p137), the rare pleasure of a felucca trip up the Nile and then a pause in **Alexandria** (p117), the beacon of the ancient world. Racing across Libya, don't miss **Cyrene** (p485), **Leptis Magna** (p479) and **Tripoli** (p471). If you're in this for the long haul, get to the **Jebel Acacus** (p498), deep in the Sahara. And then pause, hopefully not for the first time, to marvel at just how far you've come.

This epic 12,000km trip is really for those on extended career breaks or gap years as visiting every place will take at least two months. Get your Libyan visa before you set out and make sure an Israeli visa stamp doesn't limit your movement.



FROM THE CASPIAN TO THE BLACK SEA

Two Weeks

As long as the great Shiite pilgrimage centres of Najaf and Kerbala in Iraq remain off-limits, **Mashhad** (p238) is the place to go to understand the devotion, friendliness and architectural splendour of Shiite Islam's ancient past. The journey northwest from here begins in the steppes of Central Asia and winds close to the Turkmenistan border, taking you past the spectacular tomb tower at **Gonbad-e Kavus** (Gonbad-e Qabus; p238) and then down to the shores of the Caspian Sea. **Ramsar** (p204) is the Caspian's most appealing resort town, while the village of **Masuleh** (p204), near Rasht, is an enchanting little village of cream-coloured houses in the hills behind the Caspian.

After rejoining more-travelled routes at **Tabriz** (p201), cross into Turkey, pause long enough in **Doğubayazit** (p621) to marvel at the improbable beauty of **Mt Ararat** (p621), with a possible detour down to pretty **Van** (p622). While in the area, you'd kick yourself if you missed the fortress, *hammams* (bathhouses) and Russian houses of **Kars** (p620) or the Seljuk buildings of **Erzurum** (p618). **Trabzon** (p616), Turkey's most beautiful Black Sea port, feels more Eastern European than Turkish and promises a wealth of Byzantine buildings, most notable among them being the extraordinary Sumela Monastery. Hugging the coastline as you continue west, the beaches of **Ünye** (p616), the convenience of **Samsun** (p616), the time-worn feel of **Sinop** (p616), and the Roman and Byzantine ruins of **Amasra** (p616) are all recommended as a means of experiencing a Turkey that few Western travellers will ever get.

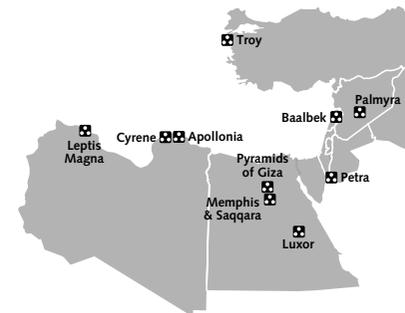
One of the downsides of getting off the beaten track is the less regular nature of public transport. Two weeks will nonetheless be enough to cover every destination in this itinerary (3700km), although some time sunning yourself in a seaside town will add a few extra days.



TAILORED TRIPS

CITIES OF ANTIQUITY

If the mere suggestion of toga-clad Romans or decadent Egyptians gets your heart racing, the Middle East is a dream for lovers of the ancient world – all of the places listed in this itinerary are inscribed on Unesco's World Heritage list (www.unesco.org). Long before Hollywood made it into a blockbuster, the ancient city of **Troy** (Truva; p581) was one of the greatest cities of ancient Greece. From the shores of the Aegean to an oasis in the Syrian desert, your next stop should be **Palmyra** (p544), an evocative site that is simply sublime at sunset. Across the border in Lebanon, **Baalbek** (p451) is similarly spectacular with its Phoenician origins and ample Roman ruins. In Jordan **Petra** (p389) is astonishing, hewn from the rose-red rock 2000 years ago by one of the Middle East's most enigmatic ancient peoples – the Nabataeans. A journey across the Red Sea and Sinai peninsula opens up the wonders of Ancient Egypt, primarily the **Pyramids of Giza** (p106), the less-visited **Memphis and Saqqara** (p117), and the incomparable tombs and temples around **Luxor** (p124). The ancient cities of Libya – **Apollonia** (p488), **Cyrene** (p485) and **Leptis Magna** (p479) are quite possibly the Middle East's most impressive ruins to combine layers of Phoenician, Greek and Roman civilisations by the shores of the Mediterranean.



THE BEST OF THE BAZAARS

There are few experiences more unforgettable than a Middle Eastern bazaar (souq) – the ancient vaulted ceilings filtering sunlight into labyrinthine lanes; the smell of spices; and everything from the kitsch of a Mecca wall clock to the finest carpets of Persia. If you're coming from the east, **Kerman** (p233) has a vaulted bazaar to whet your appetite. **Esfahan's** (p216) markets twist their way out across the city like a self-contained community, home to mosques, *hammams* and a discrete sales pitch. **Tehran** (p192) is another sprawling maze and the perfect place to take in the pulse of modern Iran. A long but beautiful journey across eastern Turkey will take you to **Istanbul** (p570), where the Covered Market is one of many highlights well worth the long haul to get here. The souqs of **Aleppo** (p538) are extensive, but it's the old-world charm that makes them perhaps the most evocative and rewarding bazaars in all the world. **Damascus** (p514) is similar, with the landmarks of the ancient world watching over the narrow laneways and the age-hold hospitality of traders who prefer tea to profits. Old **Cairo** (p106) can at times feel like one gigantic bazaar, but the clamour, aromas and endless array of goods serve as reminders that Middle Eastern markets are like no others.



DESERTS & DEEP-SEA DIVING

If you crave the solitude of a sand dune from which to watch the sun set over a blood-red sky, start your desert journey in **Wadi Rum** (p393), a world of myriad canyons, sand stretching to the horizon and ample reminders of the noble history of the once-nomadic Bedouin. To wash off the sand, the Red Sea is not far away, and home to an altogether different under-

water world. Snorkelling off **Aqaba** (p395) is terrific, but donning your fins or oxygen tank and launching out from either **Dahab** (p162) or **Sharm el-Sheikh** (p158) is even better and an experience you'll never forget. If you still long for solitude, the oasis of **Siwa** (p148) is like an evocation of a fairy tale. It offers the chance to marvel at the sheer scale of what is known by some geographers as the 'Desert Continent'.

Across the border in Libya, you'll find the Sahara in all its glory. If you've come this far, keep going until you reach the **Idehan Ubari** (Ubari Sand Sea; p495), with its palm-fringed lakes amid the dunes, and then the towering cathedral of stones that is the **Jebel Acacus** (p498).

To glimpse the other side of desert life, the

Unesco World Heritage-listed oasis of **Ghadames** (p491) – connected to the Jebel Acacus by long but beautiful desert trails – is extraordinary.



THE MIDDLE EAST FOR KIDS

Istanbul (p563) is a wonderful introduction, at once markedly Middle Eastern and comfortably European. The human adaptations of the fairytale landscapes of **Cappadocia** (p610) will live long in the memory of most children, while the hospitality of the people of **Aleppo** (p535) and **Damascus** (p510) is a wonderful lesson in life that may just shape the perceptions of the next generation. Kids love castles and Syria and Jordan have them in abundance, from the **Crac des Chevaliers** (p529) to **Karak** (p387) and **Shobak** (p388). The **Dead Sea** (p381) will leave your kids giggling at the buoyancy of it all – yes, even Dad floats! **Petra** (p389) is the sort of place that kids will love to tell their friends about back home. **Jerusalem** (p292) has a host of

child-friendly activities, while diving in the Red Sea at **Dahab** (p162) will open up a whole new world that they never imagined, except when watching Nemo. **Cairo** (p96), with its diversity and endlessly interesting sights, is one of the world's great cities and the place to blow their minds. A felucca trip up the Nile from **Aswan** (p137) to **Luxor** (p124) offers an enjoyable break from sardine-can shared taxis. At journey's end in Luxor, the sound-and-light show at the temples of **Karnak** (p126) is a great alternative to learning history from a school textbook – a double-edged sword because they may acquire a new taste for learning, but never want to go to school again when they return home!



Current Events

Do you want the good news or the bad news first?

THE BAD NEWS

The more things change, the more they stay the same, or so it can seem when it comes to the Middle East's two major trouble spots.

In Israel and the Palestinian Territories, Israel's long-awaited withdrawal from the Gaza Strip is playing itself out to a familiar pattern, despite hopes for a new relationship following the death of Yasser Arafat. Israeli settlers are vowing to resist any moves towards a land handover by the government of Ariel Sharon. The Palestinian leadership of Mahmoud Abbas continues to struggle to rein in the suicide bombings and electoral popularity of Hamas. And the most contentious issues (the status of the West Bank and Jerusalem, the right of return for Palestinian refugees, and the ability of a future Palestinian state to guarantee security) are being postponed yet again. In the meantime, the division by the media of both Palestinians and Israelis into the stereotypical groupings of hardliners and moderates, despite many shades of grey in between, continues apace, as does the desperation of ordinary people on both sides.

In Iraq the morass that is the US-led occupation continues largely unabated – the most pressing problem is the perilous security situation for ordinary Iraqis – and will most likely do so until strong Iraqi institutions are built, Western soldiers leave the country and Iraqis feel that their future is their own to decide. Think years, not months.

Elsewhere there are other worrying signs that tensions won't be relieved anytime soon. The June 2005 election in Iran of the apparently conservative hardline president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, looks set to slow if not stall Iran's reform process. The election also signposted further tensions between Iran and the West over Iran's nuclear programme after the new president promised to continue it as a matter of national pride and necessity. Thinly veiled threats of military action by the US administration of George W Bush if Iran fails to comply are the most worrying component of this endgame between two countries that have come to symbolise the conflict between Islam and the West.

Syria, like Iran, has long suffered from a troubled relationship with the US. The latter claims that Syria has been less than wholehearted in its efforts to rein in insurgents operating in Iraq. US-Syrian relations seem to be perpetually on the verge of improvement, but expect no miraculous rapprochement as long as both sides play to their respective domestic audiences. Perhaps Syria's almost unfailingly hospitable people could show both governments the way.

If Syria has been waiting to become America's best friend for a while, that's nothing compared to Turkey's long wait for EU membership. The political sensitivity within Europe of having a Muslim (albeit secular) country as its largest member ensures that Turkey will most likely have to wait a few years more.

The suicide bombings in the Egyptian resort town of Sharm el-Sheikh in July 2005, in which 64 people died (most of them Egyptians), was a major blow to Egypt's tourism industry. Tourists in Egypt had been targeted before – most notably in 1997 – but Egyptian security forces had until recently been winning the battle.

NB The following figures do not include Iraq, for which accurate statistics are not available.

On most socioeconomic indicators, including GDP per capita, literacy, infant mortality and life expectancy, people living in the Palestinian Territories fare far worse than those covered by the statistics for the whole of Israel and the Palestinian Territories.

Israel and the Palestinian Territories have the highest life expectancy (79.02 years) with the lowest being Iran (69.35). Only in Israel (81.19) and Jordan (80.5) does the average woman live to over 80 and statistically, nowhere do men attain such an age.

Then, in November 2005, suicide bombings in three hotels in Amman, including one at a wedding party, sent shockwaves through Jordan. The Middle East's hitherto most stable country (long dubbed the 'Hashemite Kingdom of Boredom' by yawning journalists) turned overnight into a frontline of the war against terrorism.

THE GOOD NEWS

In Egypt, democracy normally advances at a becalmed felucca's pace, but there are increasing signs that the political system may be opened up to more dissenting voices and more widespread participation. The extension of this principle to the presidency of Hosni Mubarak is, however, highly unlikely.

Lebanon is a country that rarely does things by halves, so when the iconic Lebanese leader Rafiq Hariri was killed in a car bomb explosion in early 2005, the Lebanese did what they do best and ushered in fundamental change, taking to the streets during the so-called Cedar Revolution. The much-resented Syrian army – not known for yielding to people power and international pressure – left Lebanon after three decades of occupation. It leaves many to hope that, even as the Syrians continue to keep a watchful eye over their client politicians, Lebanon has its best opportunity in decades to finally determine its own future free from outside intervention.

Perhaps the most remarkable developments in the region have been those that have crossed borders. In the course of just a few years, the Qatar-based Al-Jazeera broadcasting company has transformed the flow of information to the extent that information is no longer something controlled solely by governments. Satellite TV is now almost universal across the region. While most sets are tuned to 24-hour music channels from Lebanon, the fact that Middle Easterners now have a choice is a potentially revolutionary change. When something happens in the Middle East, people from Libya to Iran can now make up their own mind as to what to watch and who to believe, rather than having to choose – as they did just a few years ago – between what the government tells them and the slanted infotainment that masquerades as truth on some Western channels. The Internet, too, has crossed borders and has denied dictators one of their hitherto most fiercely guarded weapons: the control over what their people read and watch.

If the younger generation of leaders now popping up across the Middle East (especially in Jordan and Syria) has offered hopes that the old conflicts may one day be put to rest, Libyans have no such luxury. That said, even as Mu'ammarr Gaddafi continues to rule unchallenged – having ruled since 1969, he is the third-longest-serving ruler in the world – the wily old colonel has shown that change can come from the most unlikely of quarters. With his renunciation of weapons of mass destruction, the settling of all claims against Libya for past terrorist activities and the opening up of Libya's economy to foreign investment and greater liberalisation, Colonel Gaddafi has gone from Saddam Hussein-esque public enemy number one to the West's new best friend. Although issues remain in the critical area of human rights, Libya has never felt so optimistic, daring at last to believe that it stands on the cusp of a brighter future.

Iran's infant mortality rate (44.7 per 1000 live births) is the worst, with Turkey (44.2) and Egypt (35.26) not far behind. Israel and the Palestinian Territories (7.37) far outstrip the rest, of which Jordan (18.86), Lebanon (26.43) and Libya (26.8) come closest to shining.

The highest literacy rate is in Israel and the Palestinian Territories (93.6%), followed by Jordan (91.3%), Lebanon (87.4%), Turkey (86.5%), Libya (82.6%) and Iran (79.5%). Egypt has by far the lowest at 57.7%.

Israel and the Palestinian Territories have easily the highest GDP per capita (US\$16,244), after which come Lebanon (US\$4975), Turkey (US\$3555) and Libya (US\$3166). Egypt has the lowest at US\$958.

The Authors



ANTHONY HAM

Coordinating Author, Iraq, Libya

In another life Anthony was a refugee lawyer who represented clients from the Middle East – especially Iraq and Iran – and obtained a Masters degree in Middle Eastern politics. Then he went to the Middle East and really started learning. Now a full-time writer and photographer based in Madrid, he has written Lonely Planet's *Libya* and *Saudi Arabia* guides and has contributed to *Jordan*, *Iran* and previous editions of *Middle East*, as well as writing for numerous newspapers around the world. All of which provides him with an excuse (although none is needed) to return to the cities where he first fell irretrievably in love with the region, and to retreat to the silence of the desert.

My Favourite Trip

After plotting my journey from the idyllic seaside village of Kaş (p600), I would make a beeline for Damascus (p510), my favourite Middle Eastern city. When I could finally tear myself away from cafés filled with storytellers and hospitable Syrians, I'd drop in on old friends in Amman (p364). I'm always drawn to the wonder that is Petra (p389) and the silent beauty of Wadi Rum (p393). With my love of the desert rekindled, I'd head for Cairo (p96; one of the world's greatest cities) and sophisticated Alexandria (p117) before heading across Libya. En route to the desert oasis of Ghadames (p491), I wouldn't miss Cyrene (p485), Leptis Magna (p479) and the magical medina of Tripoli (p473). And then I'd leave the world behind and travel deep into the desert – the Idehan Ubari (p495), Jebel Acacus (p498) and the glorious isolation of Waw al-Namus (p498).



ANDREW BURKE

Iran

Andrew's long-held affection for Iran has seen him spend five months in the country in recent years, both working for Lonely Planet and as a photojournalist. Apart from enjoying endless tea and unforgettable hospitality, in 2003 he reported on the Bam earthquake and wrote much of Lonely Planet's *Iran* guide, and he's written about Iran's last two general elections for major newspapers. Andrew has twice been arrested while researching, but despite these 'misunderstandings' believes Iranians are among the most hospitable people on earth. During research he kept a blog featured on www.lonelyplanet.com. When he's not travelling Andrew lives in Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

LONELY PLANET AUTHORS

Why is our travel information the best in the world? It's simple: our authors are independent, dedicated travellers. They don't research using just the Internet or phone, and they don't take freebies in exchange for positive coverage. They travel widely, to all the popular spots and off the beaten track. They personally visit thousands of hotels, restaurants, cafés, bars, galleries, palaces, museums and more – and they take pride in getting all the details right, and telling it how it is. For more, see the authors section on www.lonelyplanet.com.



JEAN-BERNARD CARILLET

Turkey

Jean-Bernard's fervour for Turkey was first sparked by a train ride from Paris that ended in Istanbul during his teenage years. Since then, his attraction to the Middle East has never been tamed. For this book, he was too happy to travel the breadth and length of Turkey, from Edirne to Kars and from Trabzon to Gaziantep. He tried everything from puffing nargileh and relaxing in a *hamam* (bathhouse) to boutique hotels and sharing a cup of tea with Kurdish nomads in the mountains. As an incorrigible Frenchman and foodie, he also ate his way through more *fıstıklı baklava* (pistachio baklava) and kebabs than he now cares to remember.



MICHAEL KOHN

Israel & the Palestinian Territories

Michael's earliest exposure to Judaism and Israel came in his mother's kitchen, where the smell of matzo ball soup wafted through the air on Shabbat and toasted bagels were piled high on Sunday mornings. He made his first trip to Israel at the impressionable age of 15, when he and 50 schoolmates stormed the Old City markets by day and the Jerusalem Underground discotheque by night. A return to the Middle East half a lifetime later led him around Israel's neighbours Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon before finally plunging in to research this guide. Michael has worked on several other Lonely Planet guidebooks, including *Central Asia*, *Tibet* and *Mongolia*.



FRANCES LINZEE GORDON

Lebanon

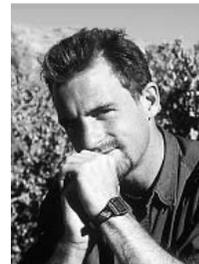
Frances' fervour for travel was first sparked by a school scholarship to Venice aged 17. Since then she's travelled extensively in the Middle East, for which she has a special passion. Frances contributes travel articles and photos to a variety of publications, and recently completed an MA in African and Asian (Middle Eastern) Studies and Arabic. Her other work includes radio and TV appearances (including a slot as 'travel advisor' to BBC News 24). Frances believes passionately in the benefits of travel both for the tourist and for the country. She also encourages women to travel, considering her gender a help not a hindrance, particularly when negotiating hurdles on the road!



VIRGINIA MAXWELL

Food & Drink, Egypt, Syria

After working for many years as a publishing manager at Lonely Planet's Melbourne headquarters, Virginia decided that she'd be happier writing guidebooks than commissioning them. Since making this decision she's authored Lonely Planet's *Istanbul* city guide and covered Lebanon and the United Arab Emirates for other titles. With partner Peter and young son Max she travels regularly in the Middle East, and particularly loves spending time in Istanbul and Damascus.



BRADLEY MAYHEW

Jordan

Bradley has returned to the Middle East frequently since first visiting Jordan in the early 1990s as an adventure tour organiser. Since then he's travelled the breadth of the Islamic world from Morocco to Tajikistan as a guidebook writer.

He's the coauthor of Lonely Planet guides to Jordan, Central Asia, Tibet and Shanghai and has worked on Lonely Planet guides from *Morocco* to *Mongolia*. He's the coauthor and photographer of the *Odyssey guide to Uzbekistan* and has lectured on Central Asia at the Royal Geographic Society.

CONTRIBUTING AUTHORS

Roshan Muhammed Salih After two years of 'crowd control' (aka teaching) in a British inner-city school, Roshan started his journalism career in local papers. He then moved into documentary making, working on programmes about everything from politics to obesity. Since 2003 he has worked for Al-Jazeera in Qatar covering a tumultuous period in the Middle East. Roshan wrote the boxed texts 'Occupied or Liberated? Iraq Post-Saddam' (p258) and 'Prospects for an Iraqi Phoenix' (p257).

Will Gourlay Will has been a 'student' of the Muslim culture and history since encountering Islamic relics in Spain, Hungary and the Balkans. He has subsequently taught in Turkey, travelled widely in the Middle East and written about the region for Australian newspapers and magazines. A commissioning editor in Lonely Planet's Melbourne office, he is plotting an extended return to the eastern Mediterranean. Will wrote the chapter Islam & the West.

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