Rollin’ On The River—Cycling Across Jordan
by Nancy Bestor

Maybe it happened when our jovial taxi driver told us that, in the end, we are all brothers and sisters, whether we are Muslims or Christians, Americans or Jordanians. Or perhaps it was when we were in a butcher shop in Amman, admiring the way the men were expertly carving up a lamb, and we were invited for hot tea and warm conversation. Or maybe it was in that moment when I rode my bike past a small Bedouin camp deep in the Wadi Rum desert, and a man hollered “Where you from?” and when I hollered back “America,” he shouted, “You are welcome.”

However it happened, I realized on a ten day trip to Jordan, smack dab in the center of the Middle East, that we are all just people. Yes, we’re different—very different, in fact (more on this later). But our religion and/or home country doesn’t make us better or worse than anyone else. In the end, we really are all the same.

Several years ago, when our two daughters were still in high school, Bob and I stumbled across an email from BikeTours.com about a cycling trip in Jordan, with stops at the Dead Sea, Petra and the Wadi Rum desert. We knew this wasn’t a trip for our family (you’re welcome kids), so we filed it away in the “empty nest” travel folder. This fall, at the beginning of our second year of empty nesting, was the right time.

If you’re wondering whether people bicycle in Jordan, the answer is not really. The 10 bikes our tour group used represented

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Holiday Gift Ideas for the Traveler in Your Life
by Ember Hood

If you’re looking for some new, innovative travel products for yourself or a loved one, we’ve got some great holiday gift ideas for the traveler on your list. Here are a few of our favorites.

Cargo Hauler Duffel
The Eagle Creek Cargo Hauler Duffel ($89 - $119) comes in four sizes and an array of colors. Each bag in the Cargo Hauler line is constructed with Eagle Creek’s proprietary ultra-light, extra-durable and water-repellent, Bi-Tech fabric, and, of course, features a “No Matter What” Lifetime Warranty. Organization is a cinch with two roomy end pockets and a large main compartment that features a u-shaped zipper for easy access to all your gear. Each Cargo Hauler boasts backpack straps for easy carrying, and the small size weighs in at just over a pound and is a legal, maximum sized carry-on bag! And,

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Staying Safe
How Bob keeps his valuables (other than Nancy) protected
by Robert Bestor

In 1990, during a four-week trip to Italy, I was pick-pocketed twice. Twice! The first time they got my phrasebook from my front pocket as I boarded a crowded bus. No big deal. The second time though I was in a crowd of folks who were trying to buy tickets to a World Cup game from scalpers when my wallet disappeared. Kind of a big deal, huh?

Ticket distribution for the 1990 World Cup left much to be desired. Often the only way to get one was to buy it from a scalper at the stadium before kickoff. And one night in Verona, when I was in a small crowd around a scalper, my wallet disappeared from my back pocket. I felt something odd, discovered my wallet was missing, turned around and immediately

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Travel Essentials News
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Rollin’ On the River—Cycling Across Jordan

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about half of all the bikes we saw on our entire visit. But that doesn’t stop Terhaal Jordan EcoAdventures (www.terhaal.com) from offering outstanding cycling tours of its homeland. Our eight day tour included five days of cycling, a swim in the Dead Sea, a two day visit to Petra, and a night at a Bedouin camp in the Wadi Rum desert, to name just a few of the amazing highlights. It was fully supported with a guide who rode with us at all times, as well as full vehicle support (aka the sag wagon). About 60% of the 120+ miles on the bike were off-road (dirt, rock, and sand tracks) and the rest was on paved back roads. All lodging was included in the price (about $1550 per person), as was the bicycle rental, and most meals too.

To say that this adventure was one of our top travel experiences would be an understatement. The combination of the people, the scenery, the biking, and the tour itself made this trip one of the top highlights of our lives. I’m still at a loss for words, but I’ll do my best.

Going in I was nervous. Not—surprisingly—because we were traveling to the Middle East, but because it was our first ever “tour”, and I wasn’t certain I would enjoy spending all day, every day, with a guide, with other travelers, and with a set itinerary. But I could not have been happier with how it turned out. Our trip leader, Anas, a 30-year-old three time Arab countries cycling champion, was the sweetest and most capable tour guide I could imagine. The six other travelers in our group were an absolute delight at all times. And the set itinerary included so many special stops and events that there is no way we could have duplicated this trip on our own.

For example, on our first day, a 56 mile ride (gulp!), we stopped for lunch in the home of a Jordanian family, in the small village of Mukawir, in the middle of nowhere. This family is paid by the tour company to provide lunch for bikers. And what a lunch it was. Sitting outside under a tent, we ate Maklouba (which translates to “upside down”), a chicken/vegetable/spiced rice dish that is cooked in an oven with the chicken on the bottom, then flipped upside down for serving. This, along with fantastic yogurt, a tomato/cucumber/parsley salad, and pita, were all delicious, and outside of the rice, every item came from this family’s home and farm. The patriarch of the household spoke with us through an interpreter, telling us about his family, his village, and his life. We had to ask, twice in fact, to meet his wife, the cook of our delicious meal. She came out of the kitchen as we were leaving, graciously accepting our thanks and declining to be in the group photograph with her husband.

This long day of bike riding ended with a steep, 15-mile descent down a twisty and picturesque back road to the Dead Sea. While one can take the busier and quicker main route to get there, our newly paved road had no cars, and offered extraordinary vistas of the red desert canyon, the Dead Sea, and Palestine beyond. I found myself blinking back tears as I coasted down this descent, awestruck by the beauty around me, and at my fortune in being able to experience it.

The Dead Sea is the deepest salt lake in the world. It sits at 1400 feet below sea level, the lowest point on the surface of the earth. Here we spent an hour floating in the buoyant and briny water and laughing hysterically with our fellow travelers. Note to self: Next time I’m in the Dead Sea, I’ll try to do a better job of keeping it out of my eyes, as the salt water of the Dead Sea isn’t just buoyant and rejuvenating. If it gets in your eyes, it stings like bloody hell. Of course, we also covered ourselves with world renowned Dead Sea mud, which is thought to have restorative and nourishing properties. While one can buy alluringly packaged Dead Sea mud products all over Jordan (and throughout the rest of the world) we simply scraped it from beneath our feet. Bob is still raving about his soft skin.

Our tour included excellent local guides at the main sites. On most trips that we take on our own, we rely on our guidebooks, which although good, do not offer the thorough and often personal information that guides provide. My friends know that I ask a lot of questions (aka, I’m nosy). Thus I could often be found sidled up to Anas, or another of our guides, asking for details about Muslim culture (such as multiple wives), their family lives, their jobs, and more. Our overnight stay in the Wadi Rum desert, at a family run Bedouin camp, afforded us a close up look at Bedouin life, and our guide Salaam was both fascinating and hilarious.

At times we rode our bikes past camps and villages in the middle of nowhere. Children came running out of their homes to gawk at us. Some laughed and pointed, others raised their hands for a high five, and some just stared and stared. I’m guessing these kids don’t see many people at all, let alone pale-skinned men (and WOMEN!) on bicycles.

In the city of Jerash, for instance, before

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You Can Bend But Never Break Me

by Nancy Bestor

I’ve never been the most athletic person. Given the choice of playing a sport or reading a book, I’ll choose the book without blinking an eye. I dread races and competition of any kind, and often struggle to fit exercise into my daily life. Thus our Jordan bike trip, which included a day of 50+ miles of riding, as well as “some short steep climbs where the support vehicle will always be at hand,” gave me more than a little anxiety. And riding with other people concerned me even more, as I worried about being the slowest and making everybody wait for me, or spending much of my time in the sag wagon. I didn’t want to embarrass myself, or worse, my husband.

Our trip was scheduled for the end of October, and my grand fitness plan included riding several days a week throughout the summer, strengthening my legs and getting my you know what used to spending lots of time on a bike seat. But even the best laid plans....yada, yada, yada. I didn’t ride nearly as much as I intended, and when mid-September rolled around, I realized I hadn’t been on a bike in two weeks. A couple of nights of tossing and turning forced me to start going to spin classes two mornings a week at my local YMCA. And you know what? Spin class is really hard. I sweat like a pig and rode harder than I’ve ever ridden before, and thank goodness I did, because I CRUSHED THE BIKING IN JORDAN.

Our 56-mile first day (5 ½ hours on the bike, 2900 feet of vertical climbing, and 7000 feet of descending) was significantly easier than I thought it would be. And the “short steep climbs,” which in reality were not so short, were extremely challenging but doable. There were many days of off-road riding as well, and I had never been on a mountain bike before, nor ridden on anything but paved roads. The off-road riding wasn’t necessarily packed dirt paths either. Most of the time off-road meant riding over and between big, sharp rocks, large potholes, and loose dirt. We pedaled through lots of sand too, and much to my surprise, sand was my least favorite thing to ride over. While it sounds fun, the reality is you’ve got to go very fast through sand to keep your bike upright, and speed is definitely not my specialty. I fell a few times in the sand, and I can tell you that at least it is a soft landing.

I did spend a few miles one afternoon in the sag wagon, but fortunately I wasn’t alone. The technical off-road riding on this particular day was at its most challenging, and a couple other gals joined me in the back of a pickup truck. But this too turned out to be delightful. I haven’t ridden in the back of a pickup since I was a little kid.

I was tired at night, but everyone on our trip was tired at night. Our tour literature understated how difficult the riding would be. It was significantly more challenging than any of us expected. But at the end of a long and hard day of exercise, when I was laying in my bed for the few minutes (seconds?) it took me to fall asleep, I was filled with a great sense of accomplishment. And this happened every single night.

I learned a few things about myself on this trip. I learned that chamois butter is my friend. I learned that I am much more athletic than I ever thought I was. I learned that if I set a challenge for myself, I won’t necessarily wimp out. I learned that spin class is hard for a reason (shout out to my instructor Bill—dude, you rock!). And I learned that I can do anything I set my mind to. Hear me roar.

I got regular updates on his cell phone while we were riding, and was visibly nervous when he heard that Sara might have to have a cesarean because she had been in labor nearly 24 hours. But while eating lunch later that day, Anas got word that his daughter Elena had been born without surgery. He proclaimed the news to our group with tears in his eyes, and thanked Allah. The women travelers in our group got a little teary too, and I realized again that while we might look and sound different, and have dissimilar marriage and family customs too, we all want the best for those we love. And that makes us more alike than we might first believe.

I CRUSHED THE BIKING IN JORDAN.

Our guide Anas was wed a year and a half ago, in an arranged marriage. His wife Sara went into labor with their first child while we were on our cycling tour. Anas

Jordan...

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our bicycle tour began, Bob and I visited outstanding Roman ruins. After dinner we ventured into town to look for an ATM. I was wearing a skirt that fell just below my knees, and a short sleeved shirt, with no scarf covering my head. It quickly became apparent to me that I was woefully underdressed. Men and women, children, and perhaps even dogs and cats, stared holes through me. I’m surprised I didn’t cause any accidents. Bob and I have traveled in many places where we were the only non-tourists on any given street or in a village. But I have never been so self-conscious as I was here. I tugged my skirt as low as it would go, and tried smiling and nodding at everyone who stared at me.

This only caused them to stare more.

Our guide Anas was wed a year and a half ago, in an arranged marriage. His wife Sara went into labor with their first child while we were on our cycling tour. Anas

“English? Who needs that? I’m never going to England.” — HOMER SIMPSON
Luci Lights
Inflatable, solar powered Luci Lights ($19.95) are one of our favorite gift ideas this season. They are perfect for camping, travel, your emergency preparedness kit, or to add a little extra light to a garden party or living room. Since they’re fully waterproof, you can take them boating, or float them in your pool or bathtub. They collapse down to about an inch thick when not in use, and the handy solar panel on the bottom needs just seven hours of sunlight to produce up to 18 hours of light (in the Luci 2.0). While the brand new Luci 2.0 and the LuciLux are very similar in design and function, the Luci 2.0 boasts a slightly longer battery life, and the Luci Lux features a frosted finish for calm, diffused, mood lighting. Perfect for world travelers and homebodies alike, Luci Lanterns are guaranteed to light up your night.

Scratch-Off World Map
Beautiful and informative, the Scratch-Off World Map ($35.95) helps scratch your travel itch. This elegant wall map contrasts dark oceans with copper colored, scratch-off foil, covering multi-colored landmasses underneath that are itching to be revealed. Designed as a piece of interactive art, you can scratch off countries or areas of the world once you’ve visited them or just for fun! It also features fun facts and infographics along its bottom border that you can scratch off to discover. The Scratch-Off Map comes in a sturdy tube, making it easy to transport and fun to give as a useful and educational gift. A USA scratch map is also available for $28.95.

Slim Sonic Toothbrush
Do you use an electronic toothbrush at home but find it too cumbersome to travel with? Well perhaps the battery-powered Slim Sonic Toothbrush ($15.95) is what you need for your pearly whites while on the road. They’re compact, colorful and, best of all, help you get the job done. Simply press the button to activate its vibrating bristles and brush away, just like you do at home. The Slim Sonic features a hygienic, ventilated cover for cleanliness that also prevents the unit from being accidentally activated. There are lots and lots of fun colors and designs to choose from,

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Holiday Gift Ideas for the Traveler...

and a replacement brush head and AAA battery are also included.

**LifeStraw**

Guarantee yourself and your fellow travelers access to clean, healthy, drinking water wherever you go with LifeStraw ($19.95). This ingenious and easy-to-use water filter works just like a straw to remove 99.9% of bacteria and parasites, including giardia, e. coli, and salmonella from water as you drink it. Each LifeStraw will filter approximately 1000 liters, or 264 gallons of water over its life. Lightweight, easy to use, and effective, the LifeStraw is a great tool for staying safely hydrated and healthy as you travel the world.

**Compact Travel Mirror**

Our Compact Lighted Travel Mirror ($39.95) will keep you looking sharp on all your adventures. Its sleek design folds down to 1.5 inches thin when closed and then opens up to reveal a clever, free standing unit, with two battery-powered, LED lighted mirrors, one of which offers a powerful, and detail friendly, 10x magnification. Easy-to-use and easy-to-pack, Zadro’s Compact Travel Mirror is a must for keeping up appearances while on the road.

**Flint Lint Roller**

This handy, retractable Lint Roller ($6.95) is a compact, colorful addition to travel wardrobe care. It comes with 30 sheets of high-quality, Japanese made, sticky paper, designed to lift lint without sticking to other things. It screws open and closed, protecting the sticky part when not in use. And when it runs out, replacing the cartridge is a snap with the $2.95 roller refill. The Flint Lint Roller is small enough to throw in a purse or desk drawer and certain to assure that you’re never caught covered in cat hair.

**Briggs & Riley Luggage is #1**

We were very excited to open Consumer Reports’ December 2016 issue and find that their readers rated Briggs & Riley luggage number one for both carry-on and checkable luggage. We’ve offered the entire Briggs & Riley line for well over 20 years now, and we continue to carry it for one reason—happy customers. Consumer Reports readers are happy with their Briggs bags too, as they gave them their highest possible rating for Ease of Packing, Wheelability and, most importantly, Durability. Every bag throughout each Briggs & Riley collection is carefully designed for usability and durability, with a nod to style for good measure. Each is also backed by their “Simple As That” warranty which guarantees that if your Briggs bag is ever broken or damaged, even if it was caused by the airlines, they will repair it free of charge. So if you want to be a happy luggage customer, choose Briggs & Riley for your next trip.

“Men read maps better than women because only men can understand the concept of an inch equaling a hundred miles.” — ROSEANNE BARR
**X Never Ever Marks the Spot—A Visit to Petra**

by Nancy Bestor

Here are the woefully few things I knew about Petra before our visit to Jordan. I knew that Petra was an archaeological site. I knew about the Treasury (Al Khazneh), but only because it houses the Holy Grail in the movie *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*. One of the final scenes of the movie shows Indy escaping the Treasury as it is collapsing. I also knew Petra would be something like Ephesus in Turkey. And that, sadly, was about the extent of my knowledge.

Thus when we rode our bikes into Wadi Musa, the nearest town to Petra (just a few minutes walk away), I can safely say I didn’t have any preconceived notions of what we would be seeing. But here’s the thing. Had I known more about Petra, I still would not have been prepared for its grandeur and beauty. Nothing can prepare a person for Petra.

Our first glimpse of this 2000-year-old Nabataean wonder was at night. Twice a week (at least in the month of November), Petra opens from 8:30-10:00pm for an evening visit. For 17 Jordanian dinars (about $24 USD), visitors can walk the Siq—a dark, narrow gorge formed by earthquakes that have split the sandstone—via thousands of candles, to the Treasury, which is lit up by even more candles and lights. Here visitors can sit, drink tea, and gaze at the ruin, which is carved into the sandstone cliff, while listening to live flute and rababa music. While I believe this tour is overpriced, I also believe if you’re visiting Petra when a night tour is taking place, you can’t miss it. Bob, our dear friend Dave and I were a little late in entering the tour, and that proved beneficial to us, as when we walked the candlelit Siq we were virtually the only ones in it. The rest of our group entered earlier, and had to share their walk with at least 100 other babbling tourists.

We returned to Petra the next morning with a local guide who grew up in Wadi Musa, and who remembers riding into Petra on a donkey before it became a recognized historical site. Adin taught us so much about this site, and I was reminded again that local guides are truly worth a travelers’ time and money. The stories and information Adin provided gave us great insight into this international treasure.

Even though we had seen the Treasury the night before, lit up by beautiful candles and colored lights, my heartbeat still quickened when we turned the last corner in the Siq and could see the Treasury peeking through. The elaborate ruin is even more stunning in the daytime, although by the time we reached it, about 11:00am, the area in front of it was awash in tourists, camels, donkeys, locals trying to sell their wares and services, and more.

I learned that day that Petra is so much more than the Treasury and the Siq though. It carries on for miles, with stunning tombs and ruins throughout the canyon. After a delicious buffet lunch at the Al-Anbat Tent Restaurant, we began the hike up to the Monastery, which is at the back end of Petra, a full five miles from the entrance. Yes, Petra is at least five miles long. And there are more fabulous sites all along the way. The hike to the Monastery ruin includes over 900 steps carved into the rocks. As we climbed farther and higher, we saw fewer and fewer people. There are a handful of tents and tables with items for sale along the way, including one station that advertises that they accept Visa and Mastercard. Sellers ask hikers to stop and take a look, but there’s no pushiness involved. It’s almost like they’re asking by rote.

The Monastery is well worth the climb, as it is another extraordinary ruin carved into a cliff. Similar in design to the Treasury, the Monastery is much larger yet not as ornately decorated. And the people visiting it were few and far between. There are two great viewpoints near the Monastery as well, just a little higher up the mountain.

We went back to Petra for a third time early the next morning. And a sunrise visit is definitely the best time to see Petra. We arrived just after 7am and were delighted to have the place almost to ourselves. In addition to getting a closer look at the Treasury, with no one around, Bob and I got up close to the Royal Tombs, a collection of four hugely impressive tombs that are thought to have been burial chambers for kings and queens. You can walk right into these fabulous ruins. Mind blown.

Purely by accident, we also ended up hiking behind the Royal Tombs up another steep climb of rock carved staircases, to an overlook of the Treasury. This was a poorly marked trail that we only discovered would lead to a fabulous view of the Treasury from above thanks to the only other people we saw on the hike, a young French couple who were in the know. An entrepreneurial Jordanian has put up a tent right at the best view of the Treasury, and although you can walk into his tent for free, to take pictures of the Treasury, he does sell tea and water, and we felt obligated to buy water from him.

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Staying Safe—How Bob Keeps His Valuables...

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realized that I was surrounded by dozens of people. My wallet was gone and there was no getting it back.

Why was my wallet in my back pocket you might ask? That would be a good question. All I can say is it seemed like a good idea at the time. Although I was wearing a perfectly good money belt at the very moment I was pick-pocked, I thought it might be handy to have some of my cash and a credit card in a traditional wallet. “Handy for whom?” you might also ask.

So while my passport, the bulk of my cash, my traveler’s checks (remember those?) and my other credit cards were secure in my money belt, I was still out about $80 and had to hassle with calling my credit card company and making a police report, which was a waste of time.

Anyway, did I learn my lesson? Yes I did. No wallets on the road any more. And over the years I’ve discovered that just a few precautions help make our trips safe and add to my peace of mind.

Back in 1990 all I had to worry about was cash, credit cards and my passport. I didn’t even carry a camera in those days. But now on almost every trip I also have a camera and a laptop in tow, and often not only am I carrying my own passport but Nancy’s and the kids’ too. Nancy usually handles the cell phone.

To get it all done, a money belt is a must. My go to choice is Eagle Creek’s RFID Blocking Hidden Pocket. I find it to be the most comfortable and most accessible of all the offerings on the market. And while it is accessible to me, it is still as secure as any other. It’s perfectly sized for passports and has a bit of built in organization for credit cards. It attaches with a loop that I run through my belt. And once it’s attached, I fill it up with passports, cash and credit cards, suck in my gut, and tuck it into my pants on the outside of my hip. (If I dropped a few pounds this part would be easier, but it’s still no problem.) The only thing about the Hidden Pocket is you have to wear a belt to make it work. If you don’t have a belt, you don’t have anything to attach it to.

For camera security and ice cream cone cash, both Royal Robbins and ExOfficio offer pants and shorts with a zippered security pocket hidden inside the front pocket. The pocket works perfectly for a point and shoot camera and a few bills. Whenever I travel, I am wearing pants or shorts with a hidden zippered security pocket.

All these things—the passports, cash, credit cards, camera and phone—are with us at all times. I don’t want the hassle of losing any of it and I don’t trust hotel safes. Sometimes folks forget their combination. Sometimes they leave without getting their things out. Sometimes they just leave it locked upon departure. In all these cases the hotel has to be able to open the safe. So obviously there is a master code that allows access. While I believe safes to be a good option, if someone wants to get into it, they can, regardless of their intentions.

My pickpocketing incident also factors into the type of day bag that I carry around. I always go with a shoulder bag that has a long enough strap to be worn cross-wise. While a backpack is a bit more comfortable, it is also vulnerable, as it’s always behind you. And when you want to get into it you have to take it all the way off. A shoulder bag, on the other hand, can be easily swung around to the front of your body for both quick access and for security when in a crowd. If you have to go with a backpack, don’t put anything of significant value in it.

Our laptop does make me a bit nervous because, unlike our passports and cash, I am not willing to carry it around all day. So I’ve come up with a pretty good way to hide it in our hotel room. I’ve found that my laptop slides nicely just above the bottom stiffening board of an Eagle Creek Medium Pack-It Folder. I slide it in there and close it up like I normally would and then bury the whole thing in the bottom of my luggage. Even if someone picked the whole thing up, they likely wouldn’t realize it contained a computer. We also always zip shut all of our bags and arrange our shoes and clothes and other travel gear neatly in our hotel room. We feel it’s both respectful to room service, and I, for some reason, also feel it makes it less likely that someone will go through our stuff. Perhaps that’s wishful thinking but it’s worked all over the world so far. AND, most importantly, there is no data on the laptop that I am afraid to lose. It would be a bummer if it disappeared, but it wouldn’t be a crisis. My way is not truly secure however, so it might not work for you. It’s all about peace of mind.

In the end, common sense is the way to go. As far as valuables are concerned, if you can, leave them at home. When traveling, keep anything you cannot lose—like your passport—with you. But not in your back pocket.

Petra...

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We spent almost two full days in Petra, and only scratched its surface. It truly is impossible to capture its magnificence in words, but I can say unequivocally that Petra is the finest ancient wonder I have ever seen.

Notes:

Although our Petra tickets were included in the price of our Jordan bike tour, a two-day Petra ticket is currently listed at 55 Jordanian dinar (about $77 USD).

We stayed at the Edom Hotel (www.edomhotelpetra.com), a very short walk to Petra, and while not fancy, it certainly met our needs. This hotel stay was part of our package, but a double room currently lists for about $50 USD.

We ate a delicious dinner of Mansaf, a traditional Jordanian dish of lamb and rice, with a goat yogurt sauce poured over it that you eat with your hands, at Deretna Petra Restaurant. The owner was delightful, and I highly recommend Mansaf.
Walk A Mile in My Shoes—A Thai Massage

by Nancy Bestor

Bob and I walk a lot when we travel—a whole lot. It is not unusual for us to walk 8–10 miles in a day. We often choose our two feet over taxis and buses for the simple fact that we can stop anywhere we want, for as long as we want, for an up-close glimpse of the city we are visiting. Thus, on a recent visit to Bangkok’s Chatuchak weekend market, which covers more than 27 acres and houses more than 15,000 booths, we were stopped dead in our tracks by a sign for a foot and leg massage. It sounded like manna from heaven.

While the Chatuchak market is a big tourist destination in Bangkok, far more locals than tourists shop here. And they can find just about anything they need from underwear to kitchen gadgets, and from dried flowers to pets, just to name a few things.

We were at the market on a very hot Sunday. We walked down aisle after aisle after aisle, looking at all the wares on display, including fresh and packaged foods, housewares, clothing & shoes, jewelry, furniture, handicrafts, antiques, live animals, and oh so much more. As I am wont to do, I was looking for the “perfect” gifts to take home. I’m not the most efficient shopper, and in a place like Bangkok, I am easily distracted, particularly by food. Case in point, we ate two meals here (although I like to call them snacks) before lunch.

The market is purportedly organized by product, and there is even a map that points out its various “departments,” in the event you need a particular item. But the organization is very loose, and we couldn’t figure out much method to the madness. So we wandered aimlessly down aisle after aisle, and it took a long time for me to decide what I wanted to buy. Bob humored me, but when we came upon a booth advertising foot and leg massages for 141 Thai Bhat ($4.00) for 30 minutes, he decided he was going on break. Not only were there half a dozen masseuses ready and waiting, the booth was a clear vinyl tent enclosure that was air-conditioned. Say no more. We were sold.

We told the woman in charge that we both wanted foot/leg massages, and our two masseuses got right to work. They took their jobs very seriously—there was no chatting, no laughing, and not even any smiling—just a fabulously invigorating, deep tissue massage. There are so many things I love about Thailand, and a Thai massage is right up there with the best of them. My legs and feet were rejuvenated in that all too short 30-minute rub down, and I was ready to explore more of the Chatuchak market, or at least find a good spot to get some lunch.