

Tips for travelling

Business hours

Communication

Documentation

Etiquette

Food

Health

Money: What to take

Money: Countries and currencies

For the flight

Photography

Security: Personal

Security: Valuables

Shopping

Time and orientation

Tipping

Travel insurance

Business hours

Business hours and weekend closures in the Middle East are different from those in the Western world.

In **Israel**, most Jewish businesses are closed on Friday afternoon and Saturday (Shabbat); Muslim businesses on Friday; Christian businesses on Sunday. Shabbat begins at sunset on Friday, when all public transport operated by Jews ceases until sunset on Saturday.



Jerusalem's Western Wall remains open on Shabbat, but special rules apply (Yarin Jeremy Kirchen)

In **Egypt**, government offices and banks are closed on Friday and Saturday but some government workers have Thursday and Friday off.

In **Jordan**, government offices, banks and most businesses are closed on Friday and Saturday.

In Muslim areas of the Middle East, working hours are reduced during the month of **Ramadan**.

Communication

Cell phones are becoming increasingly popular throughout the Middle East. Your service provider can advise about international roaming. Other options are to buy or rent a local SIM card, or rent a cell phone, on arrival in each country.

If you take a cell phone, you will also need a **charger** (and a transformer if the charger cannot handle 220 volts).

Internet cafes are common in most cities and towns in Israel, and in the major cities of Egypt, and Jordan.

If you use an Internet café or hotel computer for anything **personal** (like online banking), clear the browser cache when you have finished. In Internet Explorer, go to Tools>Internet Options>Delete files>Delete all offline content. In Firefox, go to Tools>Clear private data. In Safari, go to History>Clear history.

Documentation

Make sure your **passport** will not expire until at least six months after you return home. You may also need a pre-arranged **visa**. Travel agents often arrange visas for group members, but here is a general guide:



Israeli border stamps (Seetheholyland.net)

Israel and the Palestinian Territories: Visitors from most Western countries do not require a pre-issued visa. Israel has diplomatic relations with Turkey, Egypt and Jordan, but most other Middle East countries will refuse entry to anyone whose passport has an Israeli stamp. If you intend a later visit to any of these countries, ask the passport officer on arrival in Israel not to stamp your passport. You will be given a stamp on a separate piece of paper (which you will need to present on departure).

Egypt: Short-term visitors from most Western countries can obtain a visa on arrival, or in advance from an Egyptian embassy. A passport photograph is required. For travellers entering Egypt via South Sinai and remaining in the South Sinai resort area, a free 15-day visa can be obtained on arrival.

Jordan: Short-term visitors from most Western countries can obtain a visa on arrival (except at the Allenby/King Hussein bridge crossing with Israel), or in advance from a Jordanian embassy. A passport photograph is required. Groups of five persons or more arriving through a designated Jordanian tour operator are exempted from all visa charges.

In case documents get lost or stolen, **photocopy** the first two pages of your passport, your traveller's cheques, airline tickets and travel insurance details. Leave one copy with a friend at home and take the other with you (separate from the originals) or give it to a friend who is travelling with you.

Etiquette

Dressing and acting in a manner that shows **respect** for the host country's social and cultural values should be the pilgrim's aim.

Some social rules to be aware of in the Middle East are:

- Never eat, offer or accept anything with your **left hand** (which among Muslims is reserved for bodily hygiene and is considered unclean).
- Avoid public displays of **affection** between people of the opposite sex.
- Don't display the sole of your **foot** or touch anyone with your shoe.
- If you are offered a show of **hospitality**, whether it is coffee or tea or something more lavish, it is considered discourteous to decline.
- During **Ramadan**, the month when Muslims fast from dawn to sunset, eating or drinking in public in Muslim areas during the fasting hours should be avoided.
- While it is difficult to visit the Middle East without being aware of **political tension**, pilgrims are wise to refrain from expressing opinions about it in public. Feel free to ask questions of the people you meet, but be aware that the answers you get will differ considerably, depending on the person you are talking to.

Food

Nutritious breakfasts and ample dinners are usual in tourist hotels in the Middle East, though pilgrim hostels offer simpler fare. Seasoned travellers usually eat a hearty **breakfast**, and perhaps take a piece of fruit or bread roll to eat at lunchtime (if lunch is not being provided).

Falafel, a fried ball or patty made from chickpeas or fava beans, is common **lunch** fare.



Bottled water is sold everywhere (Wikimedia)

Outdoor markets may be tempting, but **avoid** uncooked, undercooked or reheated food; raw fruit or vegetables (unless they can be peeled or you wash them first); ice cream (except for internationally packaged and labelled brands); dairy products; shellfish; food that has been exposed to flies; or dishes that require a lot of handling to prepare.

Some pilgrims bring **snack** foods to eat on the bus when they are travelling.

Regular intake of **liquids** is essential to avoid dehydration. While the tap water in hotels is usually safe, bottled water is sold everywhere, and should taste better (but check that the seal is unbroken). Canned drinks, including beer, are low-risk, but avoid ice in drinks.

For the flight

Get your packing done early so you can **rest** for a day or two before leaving, especially if you are travelling to the Holy Land from the other side of the world.

Wear **comfortable** clothing. Avoid anything that is tight or restrictive.

On the flight, drink plenty of **water** but go easy on coffee or alcohol. Don't eat more than you need.

Be sure to get some **exercise**. Walk up and down the plane occasionally or exercise the muscles of your lower legs, swirling your ankles around from time to time to keep the blood circulating. Graduated compression flight stockings sold by pharmacies are recommended for long flights.

Deep-vein **thrombosis** can be caused by a long period of immobility in cramped seating, combined with dehydration and reduced oxygen pressure at high altitudes.

Try to **sleep** on long flights. Close the blinds, wear an eye mask and ask for a pillow.

When you **arrive** at your destination, sleep according to the local time.

Health

No shots or **vaccinations** are required to visit most tourist destinations in Israel, Egypt, Jordan.

If you haven't seen your **dentist** in ages, a check-up might avoid toothache on the trip.

If you are on regular **medication**, bring enough for the whole trip and carry at least a week's supply in your cabin bag. Bring a copy of a prescription, or a doctor's letter, as well. Medication should preferably carry pharmacy labels.

Wherever you go, be meticulous with personal **hygiene**. Wash your hands or use handwipes before eating.

Money: Countries and currencies

Israel: The new Israeli **shekel** (NIS) is divided into 100 agorot. Foreign currency (especially United States dollars or euros) is usually accepted, though change will often be given in shekels.

Paying in **foreign** currency on items such as accommodation and car rental avoids Value Added Tax of 17%.

ATMs are widespread and **credit cards** are widely accepted, but pilgrims' hostels usually require payment in cash.

Egypt: The Egyptian **pound** (£) is divided into 100 piastres.

ATMs are common in main cities, though not in small towns. **Credit cards** are widely accepted in tourist-friendly establishments, but not in budget hotels and restaurants.

The Lonely Planet *Middle East* guide advises against accepting **shabby or defaced notes** from money changers, as they are difficult to offload. Low-denomination notes, useful for tips, taxis and places which do not have correct change, are hard to come by.

Jordan: The **dinar** (JD) is divided into 1000 fils (a "piastre" is 10 fils).

ATMs are common except in the smallest towns. **Credit cards** are accepted in top-end hotels and restaurants and some shops.

Some **foreign** currency (US dollars, UK pounds and euros) is accepted in cash and traveller's cheques.

ATMs are increasing in Damascus, though they are not in all towns. **Credit cards** are becoming accepted by hotels and shops, but not by most restaurants. Traveller's **cheques** can be difficult to cash.

To keep track of what local prices are worth in your own currency, the Oanda.com website listed below has a useful "**cheatsheet**" facility.

Money: What to take



A mixture of cash and cards is advisable (Seetheholyland.net)

A **mixture** of cash, credit card, debit card and/or traveller's cheques is advisable for visiting the Middle East. It can be useful to take some local currency for each country, for use on arrival, but United States dollars are universally accepted.

How much should you take? That is very much related to personal spending habits. **Prices** in the Middle East are generally less than in Western countries, with the exception of Israel and the Palestinian Territories.

Group pilgrimages may not include lunches. You may also want to buy **incidental** food items, bottled water, or drinks at dinner. Then there are holy items and souvenirs, camera film or batteries. And there will always be a demand for tips (see below).

Keeping a supply of **\$US1 notes** handy is useful for tips, bottled water and other small purchases.

Using a **debit card** reduces the need to carry large amounts of cash, or find somewhere to cash traveller's cheques. You simply load the card with cash before you leave home, then make cash withdrawals from ATMs as you need more money. (Unlike cash withdrawals from credit cards, these are not charged interest.)

Some banks now offer **traveller's cards** that offer credit and debit functions.

It is wise to take **more than one** card and keep them in separate places. Your cards should have a PIN code and they should be valid for at least 30 days after your travel ends.

Changing currency and traveller's cheques is usually cheaper at official exchange offices (which charge no commission) than at banks.

Photography

If your camera uses **film**, take plenty with you as it may be more expensive overseas. Also take spare batteries.

If you use a **digital** camera, take several memory cards rather than one big one (then, if your camera is lost or stolen, you won't lose all your pictures).

If you use rechargeable **batteries**, you will also need a charger (and a transformer if the charger cannot handle 220 volts).

Photography (or the use of flashes) is **prohibited** in some sites, for copyright reasons or to protect art.

Use **discretion** in what you photograph. Taking pictures of military personnel or facilities is often forbidden. Don't take close-up photographs of Muslim women with covered faces or Orthodox Jewish men or women without first asking.

Security: Personal

A few common-sense precautions can avoid risks to personal safety.

- 1. Keep a low profile.** Don't stand out in dress, speech or behaviour. Especially avoid wearing anything that identifies you with one side or the other in Middle East politics.
- 2. When exploring** on your own, go in pairs or groups. Stay away from public demonstrations and crowds.
- 3. Keep your eyes open.** As Charles H. Dyer and Gregory A. Hatteberg say in *The New Christian Traveller's Guide to the Holy Land*, "Don't become so absorbed by the grandeur of the sites that you fail to keep track of what is happening around you. If you sense anything out of the ordinary, don't hesitate to express your concern to the tour guide or tour leader."
- 4. Take special care** when crossing the street, especially if **traffic** drives on the opposite side to what you are used to. Allow for bad driving and reckless speeding; and, in some areas, drivers not using lights at night.

The Lonely Planet *Middle East* guide says: "It may sound silly, but the greatest **challenge** most travelers face when travelling through Egypt is crossing the street in Cairo Position yourself so that one or more locals form a buffer between yourself and oncoming traffic, and never hesitate once you've stepped off the sidewalk. And do it fast."

Security: Valuables

Carry your valuables close to your **skin**, in a money belt, pouch or inside pocket. Keep cash and credit cards separate.

Keep your money, credit cards, traveller's cheques and passport on your person or in the hotel **security box** (though you will need your passport on you if you want to cash cheques during the day).

Avoid using an Internet café or hotel computer to access your **bank account**. It is better to ask someone at home to operate your bank account, and give instructions by email or phone.

If you must use a public **computer** for anything personal, clear the browser cache when you have finished. In Internet Explorer, go to Tools>Internet Options>Delete files>Delete all offline content. In Firefox, go to Tools>Clear private data. In Safari, go to History>Clear history. (But not all computers will allow these actions.)

Outside pockets and handbags make easy pickings for **pickpockets** and bag snatchers, especially in crowds.

Remember to **collect** your valuables from the security box before you leave each hotel.

Do not wear conspicuous **jewellery** or flash large amounts of money.

Don't leave bags **unattended** in airports or other public places, and don't accept packages from strangers.

Israeli **airport** security is second to none. Lengthy personal questioning and baggage searches can be expected, especially on departure (Where did you go? Who did you talk to?) Be patient and co-operate, and resist any temptation to joke about explosive devices.

Be wary of **scams**, especially in Egypt. If anyone (even looking like an official) tells you your hotel booking is cancelled, ignore him; it will be a scam to get you to another hotel.

Shopping

An essential part of experiencing Middle Eastern culture is **bargaining** with traders and shopkeepers. It is expected by merchants — and it is necessary to get a realistic price.



Bargaining with traders is part of Middle Eastern culture (Seetheholyland.net)

Haggling over prices is a **time-honoured** form of social interaction. Consider Proverbs 20:14: " 'Bad, bad,' says the buyer, then goes away and boasts."

Here are some rules of the game:

- Prices are more expensive in **tourist** areas than in residential shopping areas.
- Be wary of **locals** who are paid a commission to take you to a "cousin's" shop.
- Offers of **tea** or sweets are intended to lull you into buying.
- For expensive items, know how to check authenticity and quality. Otherwise buy in **fixed-price** shops, which might have better quality. (Or at least check prices in fixed-price shops.)
- Be cautious about the claimed **quality** or provenance of items.
- Don't appear too **anxious** to purchase an item.
- Never accept the **first price**. Often an item in a bazaar can be purchased for less than half of the asking price (or in Jordan, for 20-25% less).
- Let the **shop owner** start the bidding.
- Don't make an offer for anything you are not **willing** to buy.
- Buying **more than one** item from the same shop may get you better prices.
- Respect the **salesman**. Don't imagine you can outsmart him. He is a master in the art.
- Always be ready to **walk away** if you don't like the price; most items are available in many shops.

- Be polite and keep your sense of **humour**.
- Always keep in mind what the money means in your **home currency**.
- Keep things in **perspective**. Remember that the trader has to make a living, while all you may be doing is trying to save a dollar.
- If you are buying several items, keep a note of the **details** in case you need them for customs officers when you arrive home.
- Don't let the lure of bargains distract you from the **purpose** of your pilgrimage. In particular, be wary of being hustled into expensive shops by tour guides who get kickbacks.

Time and orientation

The **time** in Israel, Jordan, and Egypt is two hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time and seven hours ahead of Eastern Standard Time in North America.

All three countries have **daylight saving** time, which lasts from approximately March to September (early April to end of October in Syria).

Pilgrims from the southern hemisphere have an extra reason to be **disoriented** in the Holy Land: The sun is to the south, rather than to the north as they are used to. As one faces the sun, it rises on the left and sets on the right.

Tipping

Tipping in varying degrees is expected in all Middle Eastern countries. **Pay scales** are much lower than in the West, so tipping or "baksheesh" is often necessary for waiters and hotel staff to gain a liveable wage.

A supply of **small change** (such as \$US1 notes) is handy for this purpose.

Egypt: In restaurants a service charge is automatically added, but waiters expect an extra 10% tip. Taxi drivers generally expect 10% unless the fare has been agreed in advance. Demands of tips for inconsequential services are common.

Jordan: Tips of 10% are expected in restaurants (and may be added to the bill). Similar tips for waiters and taxi drivers are appreciated.

Israel: Restaurants expect 10-12% (sometimes already added to the bill). Taxi drivers don't expect tips.

Travel insurance

Travel insurance is **essential**. Read the policy details so you know what to do in the event of ill health, injury or theft. Keep receipts for any expenses that you may wish to claim.

Travel insurance policies may exclude **coverage** in countries (or regions of countries) that are deemed to pose more than the usual risks. If in doubt, check with your insurer before leaving home to confirm that you are covered. Practice can differ from company to company.