

Middle East Directory

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This chapter provides a general overview of essential things you need to know about the Middle East, covering, in alphabetical order, everything from Accommodation and Activities to Women Travellers and Work. Each individual country chapter also has a Directory section that includes more specific information about these headings as they relate to each country. Please consult both when searching for information.

ACCOMMODATION

In most countries of the Middle East, you'll find accommodation that ranges from cheap and nasty to plush and palatial; most places sit comfortably somewhere in between. Throughout this book, accommodation is ordered according to the author's preference within each price category (budget, midrange and top end). The way these price

categories are defined varies according to the conditions on the ground within each country. The amount you can expect to pay and the amenities you can expect within each category are explained under Accommodation in the Directory section of each individual country chapter.

Generally, Iran, Syria and Egypt have the cheapest accommodation, while Libya, Turkey, Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian Territories and Lebanon will cost a little more. However, travel through the Middle East is now such a well-worn path that in most major destinations covered by this book you'll find at least one high-quality place to suit your budget, whether you're travelling on a shoestring or an expense account.

Camping

Camping in the Middle East is possible, but it's always better to stick to officially sanctioned camp sites because many areas that are military or restricted zones aren't always marked as such and erecting a tent on an army firing range won't be a highlight of your trip. There are official camping grounds in Egypt, Iran, Israel and the Palestinian Territories and Lebanon. In Libya there are no official sites but it's generally no problem to camp anywhere in the Sahara desert or in the Jebel Nafusa (Western Mountains) provided you're travelling with an accredited tour company (see p506).

Hostels

There are youth hostels in Egypt, Israel and the Palestinian Territories and Libya. It's not usually necessary to hold a Hostelling International card to stay at these places, but it will get you a small discount.

Hotels

Standards vary between countries but price generally reflects quality.

In hotels at the bottom end of the price scale, rooms are not always clean. In fact, let's be honest: they can be downright filthy, and shared showers and toilets often bear traces of the previous inhabitants. Very cheap hotels are just dormitories where you're crammed into a room with whoever else fronts up.

Some of the cheapest places are probably too basic for many tastes; they're rarely suitable for women travelling alone.

That said, there are some places that stand out and while they may have no frills, nor do their bathrooms give any indication of the good health or otherwise of previous occupants. Some places even treat you like a king even if you pay the price of the pauper. The happy (and most common) medium somewhere between these two extremes is usually a room devoid of character, but containing basic, well-maintained facilities.

In the midrange, rooms have private bathrooms, usually (but not always) with hot water, fans to stir the air, a bit more space to swing a backpack and (sometimes) TVs promising international satellite channels.

Hotels at the top end of the range have clean, self-contained rooms with hot showers and toilets that work all the time, not to mention satellite TV, shampoo and regularly washed towels in the bathrooms, air-con to provide a refuge from the Middle Eastern sun and a few luxuries to lift the spirits.

For further details and other types of accommodation see the Accommodation sections in the Directory of each individual country chapter.

ACTIVITIES

The Middle East's rich variety of terrain – from deserts to beaches and snow-capped mountains – offers ample opportunities to get beyond the museums-and-old-stones routine.

TOP FIVE DEEP DESERT EXPERIENCES

If the solitude and perfect ridge lines of sand dunes, mountains rising up from the middle of nowhere, palm-fringed oases and sunsets uncluttered by the clamour of modern life are your thing, the Middle East is hard to beat. The following are our places not to miss.

- Wadi Rum (p393), Jordan – the richest desert colours as shown to you by the Bedouin who've made this land their own
- Jebel Acacus (p498), Libya – prehistoric rock paintings, Tuareg nomads and stunning rock formations in the Sahara's heart
- Idehan Ubari (p495), Libya – some of the most beautiful sand dune scenery in the world with stunning palm-fringed lakes in abundance
- Waw al-Namus (p498), Libya – extraordinary volcanic crater with black sand and multi-coloured lakes in one of the earth's most remote corners
- Siwa Oasis (p148), Egypt – mud-brick fortress and an old-world charm on the fringe of a desert that reaches deep into Africa

Cycling & Mountain Biking

The Middle East offers some fantastic, if largely undeveloped, opportunities for cyclists and mountain bikers. Unlike in Europe, you're likely to have many of the trails to yourself. However, the heat can be a killer (avoid June to September) and you'll need to be pretty self-sufficient as spare parts can be extremely scarce. However, mountain biking is popular in Israel and the Palestinian Territories, Jordan and to some extent in Lebanon (eg mountain biking in the Mt Lebanon Range). Many people particularly enjoy cycling the flatter roads of Syria. One of the highlights of travelling in this way is that locals in more out-of-the-way places will wonder what on earth you're doing – an ideal way to break the ice and meet new friends.

See p666 for details about cycling around the Middle East, including practicalities and organisations to contact.

Desert Safaris & Drives

Visitors to the Middle East either fall in love with the desert or feel crushed by the heat and solitude of the region's vast empty spaces. If you belong to the former group, as most travellers seem to, Jordan and Libya are worth seeking out as an antidote to the clamour of Middle Eastern cities. Apart from anything else, they promise desert scenery that will leave you spellbound.

The easiest place to experience such landscapes – largely because it's accessible from

RESPONSIBLE DIVING

Please consider the following tips when diving to help preserve the ecology and beauty of reefs.

- Never use anchors on the reef, and take care not to ground boats on coral.
- Avoid touching or standing on living marine organisms or dragging equipment across the reef. Polyps can be damaged by even the gentlest contact. If you must hold on to the reef, only touch exposed rock or dead coral.
- Be conscious of your fins. Even without contact, the surge from fin strokes near the reef can damage delicate organisms. Take care not to kick up clouds of sand, which can smother organisms.
- Practise and maintain proper buoyancy control. Major damage can be done by divers descending too fast and colliding with the reef.
- Take great care in underwater caves. Spend as little time within them as possible as your air bubbles may be caught within the roof and thereby leave organisms high and dry. Take turns to inspect the interior of a small cave.
- Resist the temptation to collect or buy corals or shells or to loot marine archaeological sites (mainly shipwrecks).
- Ensure that you take home all your rubbish and any litter you may find as well. Plastics in particular are a serious threat to marine life.
- Do not feed fish.
- Minimise your disturbance of marine animals. *Never* ride on the backs of turtles.

major travel routes and is compact enough to explore within short time frames – is Wadi Rum (p393) in Jordan with its orange sand, improbable rocky mountains and echoes of TE Lawrence. There are plenty of operators there who organise anything from afternoon camel treks to 4WD safaris and hikes lasting several days.

Libya offers the chance to lose yourself amid some of the finest landscapes anywhere in the world's largest and most evocative desert – the Sahara. As visits to Libya are only possible as part of an escorted tour (p503), the hassle of planning your own expedition is usually taken care of by your guide who can arrange shorter camel or 4WD safaris of a few days or 4WD expeditions lasting up to two weeks.

In Egypt, you'll find that there are plenty of small Bedouin operators who lead groups into the Sinai interior (p158) on overnight, two- or three-day camel treks. It is also possible to head off into the less-visited Western Desert (p145) as part of a 4WD safari.

Israel's Negev Desert is less attractive than deserts elsewhere, but there are some fun truck tours organised by Desert Eco Tours (see p334) in Eilat.

Diving

The Red Sea is a revelation for those who've never dived before and even for many who have – it's one of the world's top diving sites and a wholly different world from any you may have experienced before. Seemingly around every underwater corner is a dazzling array of colourful coral and fish life, supported by an extensive reef system and the occasional shipwreck. The best place to experience the Red Sea is from one of the resorts on southern Sinai (p158) or south along Egypt's Red Sea coast (p153). Eilat (p332) in Israel and Aqaba (p395) in Jordan also have dive centres, but if you're travelling on to Egypt, it's worth the wait.

Most clubs in these places offer every possible kind of dive course. The average open-water certification course for beginners, either with CMAS, PADI or NAUI, takes about five days and usually includes several dives. The total cost varies between US\$275 and US\$400 depending on the operator and location. A day's diving (two dives), including equipment and air fills, costs US\$50 to US\$100. An introductory dive is around US\$60. Full equipment can be hired for about US\$20 per day.

For more details see the Activities sections in each country's Directory.

Hammams

One of the great sensual indulgences of the Middle East, the *hammam* (*hamam* in Turkey) is better known in the West as a 'Turkish bath'. There's nothing quite like a robust massage on tiled slabs, a sweltering steam-room session, or hot tea taken afterwards while swathed in towels, all under vaulted domes that have changed little in centuries (the architecture is invariably exceptional). Even if you've showered beforehand you'll never consider yourself clean again until you've had a *hammam*. For years afterwards you'll remember your masseur as you would a scary teacher who taught you some of the more invigorating lessons in life.

The Middle East's best *hammams*:
Çemberlitaş Hamamı (p571) Istanbul, Turkey.
Cağaloğlu Hamamı (p571) Istanbul, Turkey.
Hamam Yalbougha an-Nasyr (p540) Aleppo, Syria.
Hamam Nureddin (p515) Damascus, Syria.
Al-Pasha Hammam (p371) Amman, Jordan.
Al-Shifa (p342) Nablus, Israel and the Palestinian Territories.
Hamam Draghut (p474) Tripoli, Libya.

For a rundown on the complete *hammam* experience see p571.

Hiking & Climbing

Jordan is a trekkers' and climbers' paradise, most notably in the spectacular landscapes around Wadi Rum (p393), Petra (p389) and

the steep valleys of Dana Nature Reserve (p387) and Wadi Mujib (p387). Maktesh Ramon (the Middle East's largest crater; p331) and the canyons and pools of En Avdat in Israel and the Palestinian Territories' Negev Desert are great trekking areas, but those who don sturdy boots and head to the higher, cooler Upper Galilee and Golan regions (p324) will also be amply rewarded.

North of Tehran it's possible to climb Mt Damavand (5671m; p198), the highest peak in the Middle East. The surrounding Alborz Mountains also offer some marvellous trekking and mountaineering.

In Turkey some fine trails pass through the Kaçkar Mountains, the Ala Dağlar (near Niğde), the mountains of Lycia, Cappadocia

and Mt Ararat (5137m) near Doğubayazıt. For more information see p630.

See the Activities section in the relevant country chapters for further details.

Sailing

With its whitewashed villages, idyllic ports and mountainous backdrop, Turkey's Mediterranean coast is ideal for yacht cruising, especially given its proximity to the Greek Islands. Possibilities include everything from day trips to two-week luxury charters. Kuşadası, Bodrum and Marmaris are the main centres, with more resorts developing yachting businesses all the time. You can hire crewless bareboats or flotilla boats, or take a cabin on a boat hired by an agency.

RESPONSIBLE HIKING

To help preserve the ecology and beauty of the Middle East, consider the following tips when hiking.

Erosion

- Hillsides and mountain slopes, especially at high altitudes, are prone to erosion. Stick to existing tracks and avoid short cuts.
- If a well-used track passes through a mud patch, walk through the mud so as not to increase the size of the patch.
- Avoid removing the plant life that keeps topsoils in place.

Fires & Low-Impact Cooking

- Don't depend on open fires for cooking. The cutting of wood for fires in popular trekking areas can cause rapid deforestation. Cook on a lightweight kerosene, alcohol or Shellite (white gas) stove and avoid those powered by disposable butane gas canisters.
- If you are trekking with a guide and porters, supply stoves for the whole team. In alpine areas, ensure that all members are outfitted with enough clothing so that fires are not a necessity for warmth.
- If you patronise local accommodation, select those places that do not use wood fires to heat water or cook food.
- Fires may be acceptable below the tree line in areas that get very few visitors. If you light a fire, use an existing fireplace. Don't surround fires with rocks. Use only dead, fallen wood. Remember the adage 'the bigger the fool, the bigger the fire'. Use minimal wood, just what you need for cooking. In huts, leave wood for the next person.
- Ensure that you fully extinguish a fire after use. Spread the embers and flood them with water.

Human Waste Disposal

- Contamination of water sources by human faeces can lead to the transmission of all sorts of nasties. Where there is a toilet, please use it. Where there is none, bury your waste. Dig a small hole 15cm (6in) deep and at least 100m (320ft) from any watercourse. Cover the waste with soil and a rock. In snow, dig down to the soil.

- Ensure that these guidelines are applied to a portable toilet tent if one is being used by a large trekking party. Encourage all party members, including porters, to use the site.

Rubbish

- Carry out *all* your rubbish. Don't overlook easily forgotten items, such as silver paper, orange peel, cigarette butts and plastic wrappers. Empty packaging should be stored in a dedicated rubbish bag. Make an effort to carry out rubbish left by others.
- Never bury your rubbish: digging disturbs soil and ground cover and encourages erosion. Buried rubbish will likely be dug up by animals, who may be injured or poisoned by it. It may also take years to decompose.
- Minimise waste by taking minimal packaging and no more food than you will need. Take reusable containers or stuff sacks.
- Sanitary napkins, tampons, condoms and toilet paper should be carried out despite the inconvenience. They burn and decompose poorly.

Washing

- Don't use detergents or toothpaste in or near watercourses, even if they are biodegradable.
- For personal washing, use biodegradable soap and a water container (or even a lightweight, portable basin) at least 50m (160ft) away from the watercourse. Disperse the waste water widely to allow the soil to filter it fully.
- Wash cooking utensils 50m (160ft) from watercourses with a scourer, sand or snow, not detergent.

Wildlife Conservation

- Do not engage in or encourage hunting.
- Never buy items made from endangered species.
- Don't attempt to exterminate any animals you may find in huts. In wild places, they are likely to be protected native animals.
- Discourage the presence of wildlife by not leaving food scraps behind you. Place gear out of reach and tie packs to rafters or trees.
- Do not feed the wildlife as this can lead to animals becoming dependent on hand-outs, to unbalanced populations and to diseases.

DESERT HIKING

While the Middle East offers a host of hiking opportunities, the conditions are quite different to those most visitors are accustomed to. For this reason, you have to be careful in picking the right time of year for your visit so that you don't expire by lunchtime on the first day.

In the summer, hiking can be extremely dangerous, and in 40°C heat most hikers will go through 1L of water every hour. Even in the cooler months, your main issue will be water, and hikers should have available at least 4L per person per day (an excellent way to carry water is in 2L plastic soft drink bottles, which are available in many places).

The most effective way to conserve water isn't necessarily to drink sparingly, as this tends to psychologically focus attention on water availability, and may lead to an unhealthy hysteria. Before setting off in the morning, flood your body's cells with water. That is, drink more water than you feel you can possibly hold! After a few hours, when you grow thirsty, do the same again from the supply you're carrying. Believe it or not, with this method you'll actually use less water and feel less thirsty than if you drink sparingly all day long.

Another major concern is the desert sun, which can be brutal. Wear light-coloured and light-weight clothing; use a good sunscreen (at least UV Protection Factor 30); and never set off without a hat or Arab-style head covering to shelter your neck and face from the direct sun. You'll also value a light, semitransparent veil to protect your eyes, nose, mouth and ears from blowing sand and dust.

If the heat's a major problem, it's best to rise before the sun and hike until the heat becomes oppressive. You may then want to rest (in the shade) through the heat of midday and begin again after about 3pm. During warmer months, it may also be worthwhile timing your hike with the full moon, which will allow you to hike at night.

Because many trails follow canyons and wadis, it's also important to keep a watch on the weather. Rainy periods can render normally dry wadis impassable, and those with large catchment areas can quickly become raging – and uncrossable – torrents of muddy water, boulders and downed trees. Never camp in canyons or wadis and always keep to higher ground whenever there's a risk of flash flooding.

Ask anywhere near the docks for information. For more information, see the boxed text, p597.

A slow cruise up the Nile aboard a felucca (p130) is one of the Middle East's most leisurely and enjoyable experiences.

Skiing & Snowboarding

Although snow sports hardly spring to mind when considering the Middle East,

SAND ON YOUR SKIS

Hurting down a steep-sided sand dune with a lake at the bottom and surrounded by stunning desert scenery is the kind of activity that you won't tell your mother about until after you've done it, but it's also one experience that you'll never forget. It's possible at Lake Gebraoun (p495) in Idehan Ubari in Libya. There are also a few 'sandboards' available to maintain the interest of those for whom silent contemplation of the landscape just doesn't cut it.

there are some places where they're possible. In the 1970s Beirut was famous for the fact that you could swim in the Mediterranean waters of the Lebanese capital in the morning and then ski on the slopes of Mt Makmel, northeast of Beirut, in the afternoon. This is again an option as Beirut regains its sophisticated soul. For more information on skiing in Lebanon, see p442 and p454. A somewhat different but no less improbable experience awaits in the Alborz Mountains, north of Tehran, where Iran's slowly reemerging middle class take to the slopes (sometimes in chadors).

Water Sports

At any Red Sea resort worth its salt – from the expensive package tour resorts of Sharm el-Sheikh (Egypt) to the chilled, backpacker-friendly Dahab (Egypt) – you can indulge your passion for a variety of water sports from sailing to water-skiing. Eilat (p334) in Israel is possibly the Middle East's water sports capital, although places like Sharm el-Sheikh (p158) and Hurghada (p153) in

Egypt, Aqaba (p395) in Jordan, Beirut and Jounieh (p454) in Lebanon and many of Turkey's Mediterranean beach resorts all offer ample opportunities for year-round snorkelling, water-skiing and windsurfing. For the region's best windsurfing spot though, head to Moon Beach in Sinai.

For more details see the Activities sections in each country's Directory.

BUSINESS HOURS

With just a few exceptions, the end-of-week holiday throughout the Middle East is Friday. In Israel and the Palestinian Territories it's Saturday (Shabbat), while in Lebanon and Turkey it's Sunday. In countries where Friday is the holiday, most embassies and offices are also closed on Thursday (in Libya they close Saturday), although in areas where there are lots of tourists, many private businesses and shops are open on Thursday mornings and many stores will reopen in the evening on Friday.

In many countries, shops and businesses have different opening hours for different times of the year – they tend to work shorter hours in winter and open earlier in summer to allow for a longer lunchtime siesta – and during Ramadan (the month-long fast for Muslims), almost everything shuts down in the afternoon.

Open Sesame

Where possible, throughout this book we give the opening times of places of interest. The information is usually taken from notices posted at the sites. However, often the reality on the ground is that sites open pretty much as and when the gate guard feels like it. On a good day he'll be there an hour early, on a bad day he won't turn up at all. Who can blame him when in out-of-the-way places he may never see a visitor for days anyway? With the exception, perhaps, of those countries with a more Western concept of timekeeping (Israel and the Palestinian Territories and Turkey, for example), all opening hours must be prefaced, therefore, with a hopeful *in sha' Allah* (God willing).

CHILDREN

Your children have a decided advantage over the rest of us – unlike any vaguely news-savvy adult, most children are yet to

have their perceptions of the Middle East distorted by stereotypes and selective news reporting. Taking the kids can add another dimension to a trip to the Middle East, although there are a few provisos that should be borne in mind. Firstly it's a good idea to avoid travel in the summer as the extreme heat can be quite uncomfortable and energy sapping. With infants another problem may be cleanliness. It is impractical to carry more than about a half dozen washable nappies around with you, but disposable ones are not always that easy to come by – although in Egypt, Israel and the Palestinian Territories, Lebanon and Turkey there should be no problem. Powdered milk is widely available, as is bottled water. As for hotels, you'll almost certainly want something with a private bathroom and hot water, thereby precluding most budget accommodation. The good news is that children are made a big fuss of in the Middle East. Many locals have grown up in large families and children will help break the ice and open doors to closer contact with local people.

Another way to deepen your child's experience of the Middle East is to find books on topics you're likely to encounter – from child-friendly history that helps your children understand archaeological sites to local fables as told to children.

For an itinerary through the Middle East that has been specially designed with kids in mind, see p34, while for more comprehensive advice on the dos and don'ts of taking the kids in your luggage, see Lonely Planet's *Travel with Children* by Cathy Lanigan.

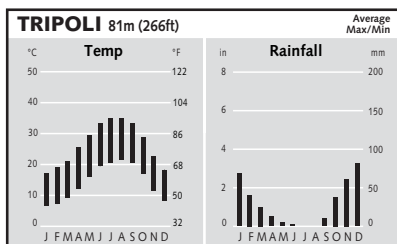
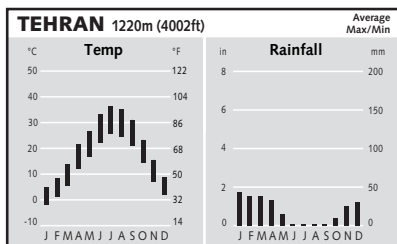
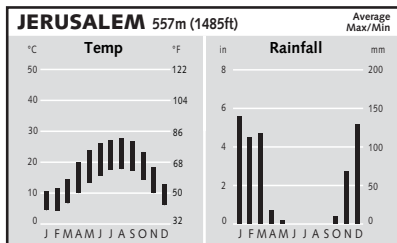
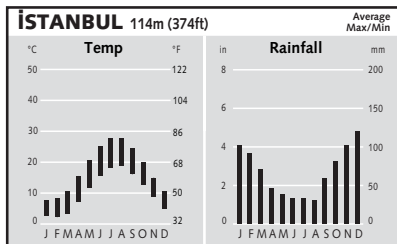
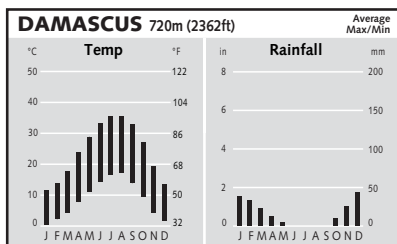
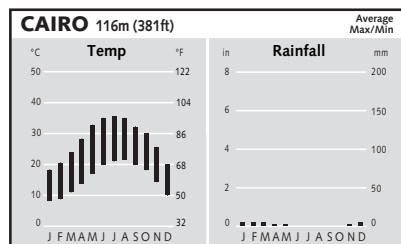
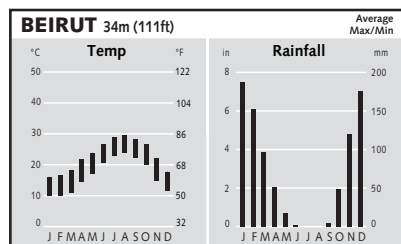
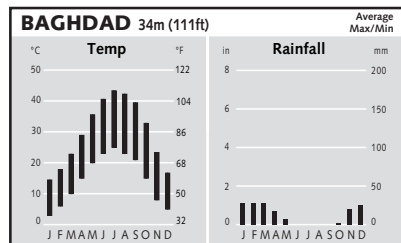
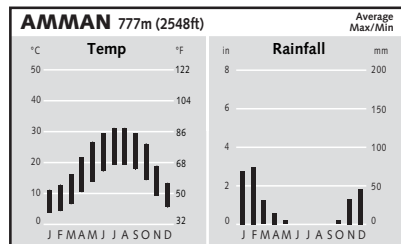
CLIMATE CHARTS

The low-lying coast lands of the Red Sea and the Gulf are hot in the extreme throughout the year, with humidity continuously exceeding 70%; summer can be unbearable. Along the southern coasts of the Black and Caspian Seas the mild climate resembles that of central Europe.

For every 100m of ascent the temperature drops by 0.5°C to 0.7°C: many high plateaus are quite hot during the summer days but still freezing cold at night. Mountains with snow caps are to be seen in Turkey, Iran and even as far south as Lebanon and northern Israel and the Palestinian Territories. Winters are regularly snowy in the nonarid highlands of Turkey and Iran. Libya is fiercely

hot in summer with desert temperatures above 50°C and high humidity on the Mediterranean coast. Desert nights across the region, especially in Libya, Iran and Jordan, can fall below freezing in winter.

Most of the Middle East is arid or semi-arid, including the greater part of Egypt, Libya and most of Jordan, Iraq and Iran. In many regions annual rainfall hardly reaches 100mm. In southern Egypt and Libya, years



often pass without rain. Dasht-e Kavir (Great Salt Desert) of Iran is the largest area in the world with absolutely no vegetation.

The coastal areas of Turkey, Syria and Lebanon, and northeastern Iraq and north-western Iran, get ample rain. Annual rainfall can reach 600mm in some areas, while in others it can go up to 2000mm. Further south there tends to be less rain, although, occasionally, southeastern Iran is affected by the Indian monsoon system.

For more information on how the climate affects travel, see p22.

COURSES

Various institutes and colleges in Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon offer short intensive courses in Arabic and there are many places in Istanbul to study Turkish. It's also possible to take up Hebrew and biblical studies in Israel. See the Courses section in the Directory of each country chapter for details.

CUSTOMS

Customs regulations vary from country to country, but in most cases they aren't that different from what you'd expect in the West – a couple of hundred cigarettes and a couple of bottles of booze. The exceptions are, of course, in dry countries like Iran and Libya where it is strictly forbidden to take alcohol into the country.

Electronics sometimes arouse interest too, particularly in Egypt, Syria and Iran. Items such as laptop computers and especially video cameras may be written into your passport to ensure that they leave the country with you and are not sold. If you are carrying this sort of thing, it's better not to be too obvious about it.

LATEST TRAVEL ADVICE

Lonely Planet's website (www.lonelyplanet.com) contains information on what's new, and any new safety reports, as well as reports from other travellers recounting their experiences while on the road.

Most governments have travel advisory services detailing terrorism updates, potential pitfalls and areas to avoid. Some of these:

Australian Department of Foreign Affairs & Trade (☎ 02-6261 1111; www.dfat.gov.au)

Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs & International Trade (☎ 1-800-267-6788; www.voyage.gc.ca/)

New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs & Trade (☎ 04-439 8000; www.mft.govt.nz/travel/)

UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office (☎ 0870-6060290; www.fco.gov.uk)

US Department of State (☎ 202-647-4000; www.travel.state.gov/travel_warnings.html)

In Iran video and even audio cassettes may be scrutinised and taken off you for examination; books and magazines will also be given a careful going through for any pornographic or other incendiary material. Even something as innocuous as *Newsweek* may be confiscated because, for example, a woman in an ad is deemed to be wearing a dress that's too low cut. The simple rule is don't take in any print material that you're not prepared to lose.

In Libya that unusual desert stone you picked up in the Sahara may be confiscated, as the Libyan authorities are understandably concerned that antiquities or prehistoric rock art not be smuggled out of the country – the definition is broadly defined so best not to test its limits.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Don't believe everything you read about the Middle East. Yes, there are regions where travellers would be ill-advised to visit. But alongside the sometimes disturbing hard facts is a vast corpus of exaggeration, stereotyping and downright misrepresentation.

The Middle East's reputation for danger is built on news of political turmoil, the Arab-Israeli conflict and the emergence of Islamic fundamentalism in many countries. Don't let this deter you. The trouble spots are usually well defined, and as long as you keep track of political developments, you're unlikely to come to any harm (see the boxed texts p646 and below).

In general, theft is not really a problem in the Middle East and robbery (mugging) even less of one, but don't let the relative safety lull you. Take the standard precautions. Always keep valuables with you or

IS IT SAFE?

Safety is a very subjective subject. Perceptions of the Middle East are shaped for most people by ever-present news stories of conflict, killings and bombings. It's a lopsided picture. Imagine somebody whose image of the USA was built solely on the 9/11 attacks or who refused to visit Spain or the UK as a result of terrorist attacks in Madrid and London in recent years. Just as the USA, the UK and Spain are rarely typecast as dangerous destinations, so day-to-day life in the Middle East very rarely involves shootings, explosions and other elements of terror. Remember that good news is rarely, if ever, reported. There are trouble spots (most notably at the time of writing Iraq, and the Palestinian territories of the West Bank and Gaza Strip), but these are well-defined areas that are easily avoided.

Incidents such as the terrorist bombing in Sharm el-Sheikh in July 2005, in which almost 100 people died, are clearly major causes for concern, but these are definitely the exception, rather than the norm. The sad fact about modern terrorism is that you may face similar dangers anywhere in the world and that you're probably no more at risk in the Middle East than you may be in your home country. As one holidaymaker was reported saying in the wake of the Sharm el-Sheikh bombings, 'Actually, I live in central London, I don't really want to go home!'

In our experience most people in the Middle East are perfectly able to distinguish between the policies of Western governments and individual travellers. You may receive the occasional question ('Why does the West support Israel?'), but you'll almost never be held personally accountable, except perhaps in deeply troubled Iraq. Once in Tehran we stood, obviously Westerners, with cameras and pasty complexions, and watched a crowd march by chanting 'Death to America! Death to Britain!' – several marchers grinned, waved and broke off to come over and ask how we liked Iran.

So, while right now we'd advise against visits to Gaza City, Hebron or Baghdad, rarely should events in the news make you reconsider your travel plans. Keep abreast of current events and if you need to phone your embassy for travel advice then do, but otherwise, just go.

locked in a safe – never leave them in your room or in a car or bus. Use a money belt, a pouch under your clothes, a leather wallet attached to your belt, or internal pockets in your clothing. Keep a record of your passport, credit card and travellers cheque numbers separately; it won't cure problems, but it will make them easier to bear.

However, beware of your fellow travellers; there are more than a few backpackers who make their money go further by helping themselves to other people's.

DISABLED TRAVELLERS

Generally speaking, scant regard is paid to the needs of disabled travellers in the Middle East. Steps, high kerbs and other assorted obstacles are everywhere, streets are often badly rutted and uneven, roads are made virtually uncrossable by heavy traffic, and many doorways are low and narrow. Ramps and specially equipped lodgings and toilets are an extreme rarity. The happy exception is Israel and the Palestinian Territories; see p348 for details. Elsewhere, you'll have to plan your trip carefully and will

probably be obliged to restrict yourself to luxury-level hotels and private, hired transport. For this reason, Libya, where escorted tours are mandatory, may be a good choice of destination.

If it all sounds difficult, remember that where Middle Eastern governments have singularly failed to provide the necessary infrastructure, local officials, guides and hotel staff almost invariably do their best to help in any way they can.

Before setting out for the Middle East, disabled travellers should consider contacting any of the following organisations who can help with advice and assistance:

Accessible Travel & Leisure (☎ 01452-729739; www.accessibletravel.co.uk; Avionics House, Naas Lane, Gloucester GL2 2SN) Claims to be the biggest UK travel agency dealing with travel for the disabled and encourages people with a disability to travel independently. It also runs tours to Egypt.

Holiday Care (☎ 0845 124 9971; www.holidaycare.org.uk; 2nd fl, Imperial Bldgs, Victoria Rd, Horley, Surrey RH6 7PZ) Information on hotels with disabled access, where to hire equipment and tour operators dealing with the disabled.

Royal Association for Disability & Rehabilitation

(RADAR; ☎ 020-7250 3222; www.radar.org.uk; Unit 12, 250 City Rd, London EC1V 8AF) Publishes a useful guide called *Holidays & Travel Abroad: a Guide for Disabled People*.

DISCOUNT CARDS

An International Student Identity Card (ISIC) can come in useful in the Middle East. Egypt, Israel and the Palestinian Territories and Turkey have various student discounts on flights and rail travel, and reduced admissions at museums, archaeological sites and monuments of anything between 25% to 33% for cardholders. A student card also gets the holder 50% off admissions to museums and cultural sites in Iran, while in Syria it slashes admissions to almost all historical sites to about a 10th of the normal foreigners' price. Bear in mind that a student card issued by your own university or college may not be recognised elsewhere: it really should be an ISIC.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

It's important to realise what your own embassy can and can't do to help you if you get into trouble. Generally speaking, it won't be much help in emergencies if the trouble you're in is remotely your own fault. Remember that you are bound by the laws of the country you're in. Your embassy will not be sympathetic if you end up in jail after committing a crime locally, even if such actions are legal in your own country.

In genuine emergencies you might get some assistance, but only if other channels have been exhausted. For example, if you need to get home urgently, a free ticket home is exceedingly unlikely – the embassy would expect you to have insurance. If all your money and documents are stolen, it might assist with getting a new passport, but a loan for onward travel is out of the question.

For the addresses and contact details of embassies and consulates abroad and in the Middle East, see the Directory sections in the individual country chapters.

GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELLERS

Except in Egypt, Lebanon, Turkey and Israel and the Palestinian Territories, homosexuality is illegal in all Middle Eastern countries. Penalties include fines and/or imprisonment, and in Iran the death penalty may be invoked. That doesn't mean

that gays aren't active but it does mean that gay identity is expressed only in trusted, private spheres.

Even in those countries in which homosexuality is not prohibited by law, it remains fairly low-key, with a few exceptions (Istanbul in Turkey and Tel Aviv in Israel both have vibrant gay scenes). However, in general as a Westerner, you're unlikely to encounter prejudice or harassment as long as you remain discreet, although this may not be the case if you become involved with a local.

For a good rundown on the prevailing legal and social situation in most countries of the Middle East – including news updates, the legal situation and postings by locals and by gay visitors – visit www.gaymiddleeast.com or www.globalgayz.com.

For more information on gay-friendly bars and hotels see the *Spartacus International Gay Guide* and Gay & Lesbian Travellers sections in the individual Egypt, Israel and the Palestinian Territories, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey chapters.

HOLIDAYS

All Middle Eastern countries, save Israel, observe the main Islamic holidays listed below. Countries with a major Shiite population also observe Ashura, the anniversary of the martyrdom of Hussein, the third imam of the Shiites. Most of the countries in this book also observe both the Gregorian and the Islamic New Year holidays. Every country also has its own national days and other public holidays – for details refer to the individual country chapters.

Eid al-Adha (Kurban Bayramı in Turkey) This feast marks the time that Muslims make the pilgrimage to Mecca.

Eid al-Fitr (Şeker Bayramı in Turkey) This feast marks the end of Ramadan fasting; the celebrations last for three days.

Islamic New Year Also known as Ras as-Sana, it literally means 'the head of the year'.

Lailat al-Mi'raj This is the celebration of the Ascension of the Prophet Mohammed.

Prophet's Birthday This is also known as Moulid an-Nabi, 'the head of the year'.

Ramadan (Ramazan in Iran and Turkey) This is the ninth month of the Muslim calendar, when Muslims fast during daylight hours. Foreigners are not expected to follow suit, but it is impolite to smoke, drink or eat in public during Ramadan. As the sun sets each day, the fast is broken with *iftar* (the evening meal prepared to break the fast). See also p55 for further details.

ISLAMIC HOLIDAYS

Hejira year	New Year	Prophet's Birthday	Lailat al-Mi'raj	Ramadan begins	Eid al-Fitr	Eid al-Adha	Ashura
1426	10 Feb 2005	19 Apr 2005	31 Aug 2005	3 Oct 2005	2 Nov 2005	10 Jan 2006	19 Feb 2005
1427	31 Jan 2006	11 Apr 2006	20 Aug 2006	24 Sep 2006	24 Oct 2006	31 Dec 2006	9 Feb 2006
1428	20 Jan 2007	31 Mar 2007	9 Aug 2007	13 Sep 2007	13 Oct 2007	20 Dec 2007	29 Jan 2007
1429	10 Jan 2008	20 Mar 2008	30 Jul 2008	2 Sep 2008	2 Oct 2008	9 Dec 2008	19 Jan 2008
1430	31 Dec 2008	9 Mar 2009	19 Jun 2009	23 Aug 2009	21 Sep 2009	29 Nov 2009	8 Jan 2009

Actual dates may occur a day later, but not earlier, depending on western hemisphere moon sightings.

Islamic Calendar

All Islamic holidays fall according to the Muslim calendar, while secular activities are planned according to the Christian system, except in Iran, where the Iranian solar calendar is used.

The Muslim year is based on the lunar cycle and is divided into 12 lunar months, each with 29 or 30 days. Consequently, the Muslim year is 10 or 11 days shorter than the Christian solar year, and the Muslim festivals gradually move around our year, completing the cycle in roughly 33 years.

Year zero in the Muslim calendar was when Mohammed and his followers fled from Mecca to Medina (AD 622 in the Christian calendar). This Hejira (migration) is taken to mark the start of the new Muslim era, much as Christ's birth marks year zero in the Christian calendar.

INSURANCE

Travel insurance covering theft, loss and medical problems is highly recommended. Some policies offer travellers lower and higher medical-expense options; the higher ones are chiefly for countries such as the USA, which have extremely high medical costs. There is a wide variety of policies available, so check the small print.

Some policies specifically exclude 'dangerous activities', which can include scuba diving, motorcycling and even trekking.

For further details on health insurance see p673, and for car insurance, see p669.

INTERNET ACCESS

From the small town of Ubari in Libya's Sahara desert to the centuries-old laneways of Jerusalem, the Middle East is well and

truly connected to the Internet, although most connections may be a lot slower than you're used to. Most travellers make constant use of Internet cafés that proliferate in most countries and free Web-based email such as **Yahoo** (www.yahoo.com) or **Hotmail** (www.hotmail.com).

Hooking up your own laptop is still difficult throughout most of the region, although in Israel and the Palestinian Territories and Turkey you'll encounter less of a problem doing so. If you're travelling with a notebook or hand-held computer, be aware also that your modem may not work once you leave your home country. The safest option is to buy a reputable 'global' modem before you leave home, or buy a local PC-card modem if you're spending an extended time in any one country. You should also carry with you a universal AC adaptor that will enable you to plug your appliance in anywhere without frying the innards in case the power supply voltage differs from that at home.

For more information on travelling with a portable computer, see www.teleadapt.com.

AOL (www.aol.com) and **CompuServe** (www.compu-serve.com) have dial-in nodes only in Egypt, Israel and the Palestinian Territories and Turkey. If you access an Internet account at home through a smaller ISP or an office or school network, the best option is either to open an account with a global ISP or to rely on Internet cafés and other public access points to collect your mail.

If you're relying on Internet cafés, you'll need three pieces of information with you to access your Internet mail account: your incoming (POP or IMAP) mail server name, account name and password. Your

ISP or network supervisor can provide these. With this information, you should be able to access your Internet mail account from any Net-connected machine worldwide, provided it runs some kind of software (remember that Netscape and Internet Explorer both have mail modules). It pays to be familiar with this process before you leave home.

MONEY

Details on each country's currency, places to change money and advice on specific exchange rates are given in the Directory of the individual country chapters. Throughout this general section we have quoted prices in US dollars (US\$) as these rates are more likely than local currencies (which may go up and down) to remain stable.

ATMs

Most of the larger banks in the region (with the exception of those in Iran, Iraq, Syria and Libya) now have ATMs linked up to one of the international networks (eg MasterCard/Cirrus, Visa/Plus or GlobalAccess systems). In countries such as Egypt, Israel and the Palestinian Territories, Lebanon and Turkey it's possible to completely avoid having to bring wads of cash and/or travellers cheques – just bring your plastic. Major credit and credit/debit cards, especially Visa and MasterCard, are readily accepted (Libya is an exception, although times are changing) and many machines will also take bank-issued cash cards (which you use at home to withdraw money directly from your bank account). Make sure you remember your PIN (personal identification number), and it's also a good idea to check out what sort of transaction fees you're likely to incur from both your own bank and the banks whose machines you'll be using while you travel. See the Money section in the individual country chapters for more details.

Black Market

There is still black-market activity in some Middle Eastern countries, notably Iran and, to a lesser extent, Libya. If you do play the black market don't do it on the street – a dealer with a front, a travel agency or tailor shop, for example, is safest. If possible, ask a trusted local for advice. Big notes are worth

much more than small ones – you'll get a lot less for 100 US\$1 bills (or even five US\$20 bills) than you will for one US\$100 bill.

Cash

Check around when looking to exchange your cash as rates do vary. A good general rule is to never change more than you have to in cash at borders or airports. Also be on the lookout for hidden extras such as commission. Official moneychangers rather than banks often offer the best deals. Throughout the Middle East avoid accepting torn or particularly tatty notes as you may have difficulty disposing of them. If you do find yourself with a bill that looks like it has been used to clean the floor, a bank alone will usually exchange it without complaints.

Bank-to-bank transfers are possible but, unless your home bank has links with a banking group in the country you're travelling in, it's a very complicated, time-consuming and expensive business, especially when you get outside the major capitals. Unless you're going to be in that one place for at least a couple of weeks don't attempt it. A cash advance on a credit card is much simpler. Alternatively Western Union Money Transfer has representatives in quite a few Middle East countries including Egypt, Israel and the Palestinian Territories and Turkey.

The safest place to carry your money is right next to your skin. A money belt, pouch or an extra pocket inside your jeans will help to keep things with their rightful owner. Remember that if you lose cash you've lost it forever – insurance companies simply won't believe that you had US\$1000 in cash – so don't go overboard on the convenience of cash versus the safety of cheques or the replaceability of credit cards. A good idea is to put aside a separate emergency stash, say US\$50, for use if everything else disappears.

Credit Cards

Iran and Libya aside (where your plastic is next to useless), credit cards are fairly widely accepted in the Middle East, although in Syria and Jordan their use is often restricted to top-end hotels. Israel and the Palestinian Territories, Lebanon and Turkey, on the other hand, are fully plastic societies where almost everything can be paid for by credit

card, right down to your morning coffee. Visa, MasterCard and Amex are the most popular. It's possible to get cash advances on credit cards in several countries in the region including Egypt – see the Money section in those individual country chapters for more details.

Tipping

Tipping is expected in varying degrees in all Middle Eastern countries. Called 'baksheesh', it's more than just a reward for having rendered a service. Salaries and wages are much lower than in Western countries, so baksheesh is regarded as an often essential means of supplementing income. To a cleaner in a one- or two-star hotel who may earn the equivalent of US\$50 per month, the accumulated daily dollar tips given by guests can constitute the mainstay of his or her salary.

For Western travellers who aren't used to continual tipping, demands for baksheesh for doing anything from opening doors to pointing out the obvious in museums can be quite irritating. But it is the accepted way. Don't be intimidated into paying baksheesh when you don't think the service warrants it, but remember that more things warrant baksheesh here than anywhere in the West.

One tip: carry lots of small change with you but keep it separate from bigger bills, so that baksheesh demands don't increase when they see that you can afford more.

In Libya and elsewhere where you're likely to be using the same guide or driver for a longer expedition, tips at the end of a journey are usually more generous, depending on the length of the expedition and the helpfulness of the guide.

Travellers Cheques

Most travellers carry a mix of cash and travellers cheques. Cash is quicker to deal with, can be exchanged at almost any place and gets better rates, but it cannot be replaced. Travellers cheques are accepted everywhere in the Middle East except for Iraq, Iran and (sometimes) Libya. If your travellers cheques are lost or stolen you get a refund. When you buy your cheques make sure you are clear about what to do when the worst happens – most companies give you a 24-hour international phone number to contact. Well-known brands of cheque, such as Amex and Thomas Cook, are better to deal with as they're the most widely accepted; both companies have offices in the Middle East.

It's worth carrying a mix of high and low denomination notes and cheques so that if

you're about to leave a country, you can change just enough for a few days and not have too much local currency to get rid of.

PHOTOGRAPHY & VIDEO Film & Equipment

If you're shooting digital, the situation is patchy across the Middle East. You're unlikely to have difficulties tracking down batteries and memory cards in the major cities of Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian Territories and Egypt, but elsewhere you'd be well advised to take your own supply. When it comes to burning photos onto CDs, the more savvy Internet cafés in capital cities can usually provide what you need, although, again, don't count on such cafés being easy to find in Iran, Iraq, Syria or Libya.

Most types of film are available in the Middle East, although they may not be easily found outside of the big cities and if you have a favourite brand don't count on finding it when you most need it. Colour-print processing is usually quite adequate, while B&W and slide processing is not that good and less often available.

Film prices are usually similar, if not more expensive, to prices in Western countries, so you may want to bring your own supply. In some countries, film may have been stored for ages in less-than-ideal conditions, so always check the 'use by' date.

Cameras and lenses collect dust quickly in desert areas. Lens paper and cleaners can be difficult to find in some countries, so bring your own. A dust brush is also useful.

Photographing People

As a matter of courtesy, don't photograph people without asking their permission first. Children will almost always say yes, but adults may say no. In the more conservative Muslim countries, such as Iran, you should not photograph women. In countries where you can photograph women, show them the camera and make it clear that you want to take their picture. Digital cameras have the advantage of being able to show people their photo immediately after you've taken it.

Restrictions

In most Middle Eastern countries, it is forbidden to photograph anything even vaguely military in nature (bridges, train

stations, airports and other public works). The definition of what is 'strategic' differs from one country to the next, and signs are not always posted, so err on the side of caution and ask your friendly neighbouring police officer for permission if in doubt.

Photography is usually allowed inside religious and archaeological sites, unless there are signs indicating otherwise. As a rule, however, do not photograph inside mosques during a service. Many Middle Easterners are sensitive about the negative aspects of their country, so exercise discretion when taking photos in poorer areas.

Also, be aware that certain countries, such as Iran, are very suspicious of video cameras and may not let you take one into the country. In Libya you pay more for your camera and video to enter museums and archaeological sites than you do to get in yourself.

See the Photography & Video section in the Directory of the individual country chapters for further details.

Technical Tips

In most Middle Eastern countries, early morning and late afternoon are the best times to take photographs. During the rest of the day, sunlight can be too bright and the sky too hazy, causing your photos to look washed out. There are a few remedies for this: a polarising filter will cut glare and reflection off sand and water; a lens hood will cut some of the glare; Kodachrome film, with an ASA of 64, and Fujichrome 50 ASA and 100 ASA are good slide films to use when the sun is bright.

Many religious sites and other buildings are not lit inside and you'll need long exposures (several seconds), a powerful flash or faster film. A tripod can be very useful, too.

POST

Postal services are quite reliable in most places in the Middle East, although in rural areas services can range from slow to non-existent – it definitely pays to send your mail from the main centres. For details such as rates and prices, see the Post section in the Directory of the individual country chapters.

Receiving Mail

If you need to receive mail, you can use poste restante services. In this way, you can

SHOPPING FOR THAT SPECIAL SOMETHING

For the kitsch connoisseur the Middle East is an absolute dream. How about one of the following?

Blinking Jesus There's a lot of kitsch available at Christian sites in Israel, but it's perhaps best represented by the 3-D postcards portraying a very Swedish-looking Jesus whose eyes open and close, depending on the angle of view.

Ephesus clock A plastic version of a Roman gate with arch stones for nine o'clock through to three o'clock. However, the time (in the open portal) between three and nine o'clock is anybody's guess.

Inflatable Arafat Just put your lips to the back of his head and blow for a life-size, pear-shaped, air-filled bust of everybody's favourite keffiyeh-wearing world leader. Gathering dust on shelves in Gaza City.

King Tut galabiyya Perfect for lounging around the house, a short-sleeved, brightly coloured robe that is usually too short and festooned with a giant iron-on reproduction of the famous funerary mask.

King Tut hologram lamp White plaster bust of the famous boy-king that appears to float like a hologram when plugged in. Available in Cairo's Khan al-Khalili for a mere US\$50.

Mother-of-pearl telephone A real telephone, but in a wooden casing with inlaid mother-of-pearl (actually plastic) patterning. Not only is it hideous but it's about the shape and size of a typewriter. Available in the Souq al-Hamidyya, Damascus.

Now-you-see-him-now-you-don't Khomeini plate A plate that you tilt one way to get a stern Ayatollah, then tilt another way for a cheery President Khatami. Available at the Holy Shrine of Imam Khomeini, south of Tehran.

Priapus from Ephesus A small replica of the (in)famous, generously endowed statue on display at the museum here. Attach to the wall for a splendid coat hook.

Pyramid paperweight A clear resin pyramid with a golden sphinx inside. When you shake it golden 'snow' rains down. Or maybe it's acid rain. Available in Egypt anywhere tourists congregate.

have letters sent to a post office (usually in a capital city or major town) for you to collect. Letters should be addressed as follows: Your NAME, Poste Restante, General Post Office, City, Country.

To collect your mail, go to the main post office in that town and show your passport. Letters sometimes take a few weeks to work through the system, so have them sent to a place where you're going to be for a while, or to a place you'll be passing through more than once.

Some hotels and tour companies operate a mail-holding service.

Sending Mail

Letters sent from a major capital take about a week to reach most parts of Europe, and anything between a week and two weeks to reach North America or Australasia. If you're in a hurry, either DHL or FedEx have offices in almost every capital city in the Middle East.

SOLO TRAVELLERS

Travelling on your own is a great way to make new friends and to ensure that you have the freedom to follow your own itinerary. The opportunity to meet locals is greatly enhanced by travelling on your own rather than in a larger group. The downside is that hotel rooms generally cost more for individual travellers (a single room is rarely half the price of a double room). Otherwise there are few drawbacks from travelling solo as most Middle Eastern trails are pretty well worn, ensuring that you're never too far away from a new travel buddy if you're in need of company. Women travellers should read p654.

TELEPHONE

In most countries of the Middle East, the cheapest way to make international calls is at your friendly local Internet café for a fraction of the cost of calling on a normal land line. Staff at Internet cafés are generally pretty tech-savvy and can sell you the relevant card (there are often a number of brands to choose from) and show you how to use it.

If you're not likely to be in a country long enough to use up all the money on the card – although even a couple of calls via the Internet can be cheaper than one call in the old way – most cities and large towns have

public telephone offices (either part of the post office, or privately run; the latter usually have three-minute minimums) where you can make international calls and send faxes. Costs for international calls start at about US\$3 per minute, and only a few countries offer reduced rates at night. The other problem is the waiting time between placing your call with the operator and actually getting through, which can be minutes or hours depending on the locality and time of day.

If cash is tight, many travellers make an international call and then make their (long-suffering) parents call them back later at their hotel. If that's the case, the least you can do is buy them a calling card back home before you leave so that they don't dread every time they hear from you.

Mobile Phones

Throughout the Middle East the use of mobile phones is widespread (not to say obsessive) and every country has its own networks. Some of these networks run on the GSM system, like Europe, so if your phone works on GSM and your account allows you to roam, then you'll be able to use your mobile (this is the case in Egypt) – always check with your carrier at home before setting out. In other places – few Western phones function in Libya and Iran – you'll have to buy prepaid SIM cards. Beware though: the cost of using a mobile in some countries is up to three times as high as a call on a land line. For further details on whether you'll be able to use your mobile phone in a specific country, see the Directory section of each individual country chapter.

Phonecards

Card phones offering international direct dial are possible in most Middle Eastern countries, including Egypt, Israel and the Palestinian Territories, Jordan, Syria and Turkey. But, even though this service is expanding, the cards can drain money for very few minutes' conversation. Probably best to use local cards for local calls only.

TIME

Egypt, Israel and the Palestinian Territories, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Syria and Turkey are two hours ahead of GMT/UTC, Iraq is three hours ahead, and Iran is 3½ hours ahead. For a comprehensive guide to time

zones in the region, see p698. Of the countries covered by this book, only Jordan and Libya do not operate daylight-saving hours.

Time is something that Middle Eastern people always seem to have plenty of; something that should take five minutes will invariably take an hour. Trying to speed things up will only lead to frustration. It is better to take it philosophically than try to fight it.

TOILETS

Outside the midrange and top-end hotels and restaurants of the Middle East (where Western-style loos are the norm), visitors will encounter more than their fair share of Arab-style squat toilets (which incidentally, according to physiologists, encourage a far more natural position than the Western-style invention!).

It's a good idea to carry an emergency stash of toilet paper with you for the times when you're caught short outside the hotel as most of these toilets have a water hose and bucket for the same purpose.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Most countries in the region have tourist offices with branches in big towns and at tourist sights. One exception is Libya where tourist information from the government is a closely guarded secret. However, even where there is a tourist office, don't ex-

pect much. Usually the most the offices can produce is a free map; help with booking accommodation or any other service is typically beyond the resources of the often nonetheless amiable staff. The exception to this are some of the offices in Israel and the Palestinian Territories, which are in fact very useful. You'll usually get better results relying on the knowledge and resourcefulness of your hotel reception. Tourist office locations are given in the individual town and city sections.

VISAS

You can either get them before you go, along the way, or increasingly frequently, at the airport or border – for more information see Visas in the Directory of the relevant country chapter.

The advantage of predeparture collection is that it doesn't waste travelling time and 'difficult' embassies are sometimes less difficult when you are in your own country – apart from anything else they can usually explain things in your own language and that seemingly meaningless but utterly essential document they require is much easier to find back home. There's also never any guarantee that the Iranians and, sometimes, the Syrians, are going to grant you a visa; if you apply from home first, you at least know where you stand before setting

MIDDLE EASTERN VISAS

The following table is intended as an overview only – for all the complications of visa costs and exactly how and where to get your visas, see the Visas section in the Directory of each individual country chapter.

Country	Visa required?	Visa available on arrival?	Special requirements	Visa available in the Middle East?
Egypt	yes (unless just visiting Sinai)	at airports & seaports only	none	yes, in all capitals plus Aqaba & Eilat
Iran	yes	no	must not have visited Israel	see p248
Iraq	yes	no	must not have visited Israel	unlikely
Israel	no	n/a	none	n/a
Jordan	yes	yes (except at King Hussein Bridge)	none	yes, in all capitals
Lebanon	yes	yes	must not have visited Israel	yes (not in Syria)
Libya	yes	yes (with prior authorisation)	must not have visited Israel	rarely
Syria	yes	no*	must not have visited Israel	only in some countries (eg Turkey & Egypt)
Turkey	see p633	yes	none	n/a

* If your home country has no Syrian embassy you may obtain your visa at the border.

off. If you are turned down in your home country, there's usually nothing to stop you trying again while on the road.

Some embassies request a letter from an employer or, if you're applying abroad, a letter of introduction from your embassy, while if the Israeli officials don't like the look of you they may ask to see that you have a sufficient amount of money to cover your stay. Some embassies also ask to see a 'ticket out', which means that before you can obtain a visa to get into a country you must have a ticket to prove that you intend leaving again.

WOMEN TRAVELLERS

Some women imagine that travel to the Middle East is taboo; many think of it as difficult and dangerous. In reality there's no reason why women can't enjoy the region as much as their male counterparts. In fact, some seasoned women travellers consider their gender a help not a hindrance in the Middle East.

Sexual harassment is a problem worldwide. The Middle East is no exception. While mild harassment (such as stares and muttered comments) can be common in some countries (notably Egypt, Israel and the Palestinian Territories and Turkey), physical harassment is rare. In fact, incidents of sexual assault or rape are far lower in the region than in the West. Sexual harassment in many Middle Eastern countries is a serious crime; local women are rarely harassed. The fact that travellers are is more to do with perceptions than with a predatory attitude per se. The best way to tackle the stereotypes is visibly to debunk them: in other words, do as the locals do and dress and behave more modestly than you might at home. And above all, keep your sense of humour!

Expatriate women and those who have travelled extensively throughout the region maintain that the most important thing is to retain your self-confidence and sense of humour.

Treatment of foreign women tends to be at its best in strictly Islamic societies such as Iran (providing of course you adhere to the prevailing social mores; see the boxed text, p249), and at its worst in Egypt, Israel and the Palestinian Territories and Turkey, where sexual harassment can be a real holiday-souring experience.

For more information on the situation for women travellers in specific countries, see the Women Travellers section in the Directory of each individual country chapter.

Attitudes Towards Women

Some of the biggest misunderstandings between Middle Easterners and Westerners occur over the issue of women. Half-truths and stereotypes exist on both sides: many Westerners assume all Middle Eastern women are veiled, repressed victims, while a large number of locals see Western women as sex-obsessed and immoral.

For many Middle Easterners, both men and women, the role of a woman is specifically defined: she is mother and matron of the household. The man is the provider. However, as with any society, generalisations can be misleading and the reality is far more nuanced. There are thousands of middle- and upper-middle-class professional women in the Arab World who, like their counterparts in the West, juggle work and family responsibilities. Among the working classes, where adherence to tradition is strongest, the ideal may be for women to concentrate on home and family, but economic reality means that millions of women are forced to work (but are still responsible for all domestic chores).

The issue of sex is where differences between Western and Middle Eastern women are most apparent. Premarital sex (or, indeed, any sex outside marriage) is taboo, although, as with anything forbidden, it still happens. Nevertheless, it is the exception rather than the rule – and that goes for men as well as women. However, for women the issue is potentially far more serious. With the possible exception of the upper classes, women are expected to be virgins when they get married and a family's reputation can rest upon this point. In such a context, the restrictions placed on a young girl – no matter how onerous they may seem to a Westerner – are intended to protect her and her reputation from the potentially disastrous attentions of men.

The presence of foreign women presents, in the eyes of some Middle Eastern men, a chance to get around these norms with ease and without consequences. That this is even possible is heavily reinforced by distorted impressions gained from Western

TIPS FOR WOMEN TRAVELLERS

Top of the list is to dress modestly. The woman wearing short pants and a tight T-shirt on the street is, in some locals' eyes, confirmation of the worst views held of Western women. Generally, if you're alone or with other women, the amount of harassment you'll get will be directly related to how you dress: the more skin exposed, the more harassment you'll get. In order to avoid giving out the wrong signals, attracting unwanted attention or misunderstandings, the following tips may prove useful:

- Dress modestly.
- Wear a wedding ring, which will make you appear less 'available'.
- If you are unmarried but travelling in male company say you are married rather than girlfriend/boyfriend or just friends.
- Don't say that you are travelling alone or just in the company of another female friend; always say that you are with a group.
- Avoid direct eye contact with local men; dark sunglasses help. There are, however, times when a cold glare is an effective riposte to an unwanted suitor.
- Don't respond to any obnoxious comments – act as if you didn't hear them.
- Be careful in crowds and other situations where you are crammed between people, as it is not unusual for crude things to happen behind you.
- Don't sit in the front seat of taxis unless the driver is a woman.
- On public transport, sit next to a woman if possible.
- Be very careful about behaving in a flirtatious or suggestive manner; it could create more problems than you ever imagined.
- If you need help for any reason (directions etc), ask a woman first. That said, local women are less likely than men to have had an education that included learning English – you'll find this a major drawback in getting to meet and talk with them.
- If dining alone, try and eat at Western-style places or those more used to tourists. Ask to be seated in the 'family' section, if there is one.
- It's perfectly acceptable for a woman to go straight to the front of a queue or to ask to be served first before any men that may be waiting – you have to have some advantages!
- Going to the nearest public place, such as the lobby of a hotel, usually works in getting rid of any hangers-on. If they still persist, however, asking the receptionist to call the police usually frightens them off.

TV and by the comparatively liberal behaviour of foreign women in the country. As one hopeful young man in Egypt remarked when asked why he persisted in harassing every Western woman he saw, 'For every 10 that say no, there's one that says yes.'

What to Wear

Except in Iran, travelling in the Middle East is not as prescriptive clothes-wise as you'd imagine. Nevertheless, it still pays to do as the locals do and err on the side of caution. And dressing modestly has the following advantages: you'll get a much warmer reception from the locals (who will really appreciate your willingness to respect their

culture and customs), you'll attract less unwanted attention, and you may well feel more comfortable (long baggy clothes will not just keep you cooler, they'll also protect you from the fierce Middle Eastern sun). Dressing 'modestly' really means covering your upper legs and arms, shoulders and cleavage. A scarf is also useful, both to cover your neckline and to slip over your head when you want to look even more inconspicuous or when the occasion requires it (such as when visiting a mosque).

As with anywhere, take your cues from those around you: if you're in a rural area and all the women are in long, concealing dresses, you should be conservatively dressed.

In the very traditional society of Iran, although it is not necessary for foreign women to wear the chador (the one-piece cloak associated with Muslim countries), it is essential for them to cover all parts of the body except the hands, feet and face (from hairline to neckline), and to ensure that the outer layer of clothing gives no hint of the shape of the body. For more on this, see the boxed text, p249.

WORK

It's quite possible to pick up work in the Middle East in order to extend your stay and eke out your savings – but you have to know where to look and what you're looking for. Forget places such as Iran, Syria or Libya: realistically, your best options are Egypt, Israel and the Palestinian Territories and Turkey, ie the places where other foreigners gather in numbers.

For information about working on a kibbutz or a moshav, see p354.

Copy-editing

In the Middle East there are literally dozens of English-language newspapers and magazines published. Unless you have the proper training and experience you're unlikely to be offered any work in the way of journalism but there's often a need for people with good English-language skills who can copy-edit. The amount of work available and money to be made obviously depends on whether the paper or magazine is daily, weekly or monthly – whatever the case, you aren't going to make much, but it may be enough to cover the cost of your accommodation. The only way to find such work is to pick up the newspapers and phone.

Teaching English

Teaching centres – both of the respectable kind and cowboy outfits – can be found throughout the Middle East region. Cowboy outfits are often desperate for teachers, and they will take on people whose only qualification is that their mother tongue is English. In general, the pay is minimal and you'll probably have to stay on a tourist visa, which it will be up to you to renew. However, numerous long-term travellers

finance their stays this way, particularly in Cairo and İstanbul.

Your chances of getting a job are greatly improved if you have a certificate in CELTA (Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults). This is what used to be known as TEFL and, basically, it's your passport to work abroad. To get the qualification you'll need to attend a one-month intensive course, which you can do in your home country via an English-language training centre. In the UK contact **International House** (IH; ☎ 020-7491 2598; www.ihlondon.com; 106 Piccadilly Circus, London W1J 7NL), which runs more than a dozen courses a year and has 110 affiliated schools in 30 countries worldwide, including Egypt (Cairo) and Turkey (İstanbul). Once you've completed the course, you can apply for any advertised positions.

Alternatively, you could fly out to Cairo and do the CELTA course at Cairo's International Language Institute, Heliopolis (which can be contacted through International House). The cost of the course is generally a little more than half the equivalent of doing it in the UK. Depending on the price of your flight, this may be a cheaper way to do it than at IH in London.

The other big employer of English-language teachers is the British Council. Its overseas teaching centres very rarely take on people who just turn up at the door as most recruiting is done in the UK. Contact the **Information Centre** (☎ 0161-957 7755; fax 957 7762; www.britishcouncil.org) well in advance of your departure date and check its website, which has a list of upcoming vacancies and British Council addresses in the Middle East.

Qualified teachers should also check www.eslcafe.com for regular job postings.

Working at a Backpackers

In Israel (Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and Eilat) and various places in Turkey (particularly İstanbul, Selçuk, Bodrum, Fethiye and Capadocia), it's usually possible to pick up work in a hostel, typically cleaning rooms or looking after reception. It doesn't pay much, but it does usually get you a free room, a meal or two a day plus some beer money. The only way to find this kind of work is to ask around.

Transport in the Middle East

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GETTING THERE & AWAY

This section tells you how to reach the Middle East by air, land and sea from other parts of the world, and outlines the routes for onward travel from the region. For details of travel once you are in the region between one country and its neighbours see the Getting There & Away section at the end of the relevant country chapter.

ENTERING THE MIDDLE EAST

For the requirements of entering particular countries, see the Transport section of each individual country chapter.

Please note that neither Israeli citizens nor anyone with an Israeli stamp in their passport will be allowed to enter Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria or Libya. For advice on how to get around this decades-old Middle Eastern conundrum, see the boxed text, p353.

AIR

All the major European, Middle Eastern and some Asian airlines serve the principal cities of the Middle East, although the cheapest (and most frequent) flights head for Cairo, İstanbul and Tel Aviv. Outside these three,

THINGS CHANGE...

The information in this chapter is particularly vulnerable to change. Check directly with the airline or a travel agent to make sure you understand how a fare (and ticket you may buy) works and be aware of the security requirements for international travel. Shop carefully. The details given in this chapter should be regarded as pointers and are not a substitute for your own careful, up-to-date research.

most of the Middle East is still seen primarily as a business destination, a fact reflected in the expense of flying there.

What this means in practice is that when booking a flight to the Middle East, you shouldn't automatically aim for the airport nearest to where you are going. For instance, your first destination might be Jordan, but you may find tickets to Tel Aviv significantly cheaper, even taking into account the cost of the overland trip to Amman.

Airlines

The following airlines all fly into the Middle East:

Afriqiyah Airways (airline code 8U; www.afriqiyah.aero) Hub: Tripoli.

Air Canada (airline code AC; www.aircanada.com) Hub: Pearson International Airport, Toronto.

Air France (airline code AF; www.airfrance.com) Hub: Charles de Gaulle International Airport, Paris.

Alitalia (airline code AZ; www.alitalia.com) Hub: Rome.

American Airlines (airline code AA; www.aa.com) Hub: O'Hare Airport, Chicago.

Austrian Airlines (airline code OS; www.aa.com) Hub: Vienna.

British Airways (airline code BA; www.britishairways.com) Hub: Heathrow Airport, London.

EgyptAir (airline code MS; www.egyptair.com) Hub: Cairo.

El Al (airline code LY; www.elal.co.il) Hub: Tel Aviv.

Emirates (airline code EK; www.emirates.com) Hub: Dubai.

Ethiopian Airlines (airline code ET; www.flyethiopian.com/new/) Hub: Addis Ababa.

Gulf Air (airline code GF; www.gulfairco.com) Hub: Bahrain.

Iran Air (airline code IR; www.iranair.com) Hub: Tehran Mehrabad Airport.

Iran Aseman (airline code EP; www.iaa.ir) Hub: Tehran.

Kenya Airways (airline code KQ; www.kenya-airways.com) Hub: Nairobi.

KLM Royal Dutch Airlines (airline code KL; www.klm.com) Hub: Amsterdam Schiphol Airport.

Kuwait Airways (airline code KU; www.kuwait-airways.com) Hub: Kuwait City.

Kyrgyz Airways (airline code KT) Hub: Bishkek.

Libyan Arab Airlines (airline code LN) Hub: Tripoli.

Lufthansa (airline code LH; www.lufthansa.com) Hub: Frankfurt.

Mahan Air (airline code W5; www.mahanairlines.com) Hub: Tehran.

Middle East Airlines (airline code ME; www.mea.com.lb) Hub: Beirut.

Olympic Airlines (airline code OA; www.olympicairlines.com) Hub: Athens.

Point-Afrique (www.point-afrique.com in French) Hub: Paris.

Qantas Airways (airline code QF; www.qantas.com) Hub: Sydney Airport.

Qatar Airways (airline code QR; www.qatarairways.com) Hub: Doha.

Royal Jordanian (airline code RJ; www.rja.com.jo) Hub: Amman.

Singapore Airlines (airline code SIA; www.singaporeair.com) Hub: Singapore Changi Airport.

Sudan Airways (airline code SD; www.sudanair.com) Hub: Khartoum.

Swiss International Airlines (airline code LX; www.swiss.com) Hub: Zurich.

Syrianair (airline code RB; www.syriaair.com) Hub: Damascus.

Tunis Air (airline code TU; www.tunisair.com) Hub: Tunis.

Turkish Airlines (airline code TK; www.turkishairlines.com) Hub: Istanbul.

Turkmenistan Airways (airline code T5) Hub: Ashgabat.

Uzbek Airways (airline code HY; www.airways.uz) Hub: Tashkent.

Tickets

Buying cheap air tickets in the Middle East isn't easy. Usually the best deal you can get is an airline's official excursion fare and no discount on single tickets unless you qualify for a youth or student fare. Some travel agencies in the Middle East will knock the price down by up to 10% if you're persistent, but may then tie you into fixed dates or flying with a less popular airline.

The nearest thing you'll find to a discount-ticket market in the Middle East is offered by some travel agencies in Israel and the Pal-

estinian Territories, particularly in Tel Aviv (p299), and in Istanbul (p566), especially in Sultanahmet.

As well as discounts on tickets to Western Europe and North America, the Istanbul agencies often have cheap deals on flights to places such as Moscow, Mumbai/Delhi and Singapore/Bangkok.

Travel agencies recommended for online bookings:

American Express Travel (www.itn.net)

Cheap Tickets (www.cheaptickets.com)

Expedia.com (www.expedia.com)

Lowestfare.com (www.lowestfare.com)

Orbitz (www.orbitz.com)

STA Travel (www.statravel.com)

Travelocity (www.travelocity.com)

Africa

The widest choice of African destinations is offered by EgyptAir, but, despite the proximity, there is nothing cheap about flying from the Middle East into Africa. In fact, for most African capitals a ticket bought in London will be cheaper than one bought in the Middle East. The best bet is to buy your African ticket with a stopover in the Middle East.

As an idea of prices, Cairo to Addis Ababa (Ethiopian Airlines and EgyptAir) is around US\$600/850 one way/return; Nairobi (Kenya Airways) is US\$635 one way; and Khartoum (EgyptAir and Sudan Airways) is US\$400/490 one way/return.

Another alternative is Afriqiyah Airways, which connects Tripoli with 11 sub-Saharan African capitals, including Bamako (Mali), Accra (Ghana), Lagos (Nigeria) and Khartoum (Sudan).

Australia & New Zealand

EgyptAir has a regular service from Sydney via Southeast Asia to Cairo, from where there are connections to almost all other Middle Eastern destinations. However, the aircraft and in-flight service are much better with Gulf Air and Emirates, both of which fly out of Sydney and Melbourne to Abu Dhabi, Bahrain and Dubai, with connections onward from there to most other Middle Eastern capitals. Return fares to the Middle East start from around A\$1450. Gulf Air's round-the-world (RTW) fare could be good value if you also want to visit London and stop over in Asia.

If you're heading for Tel Aviv, Qantas Airways and El Al via Asia are the best. Other options include Alitalia via Milan, Lufthansa Airlines via Frankfurt or KLM Royal Dutch Airlines via Amsterdam.

Both **STA Travel** (☎ 1300 733 035; www.statravel.com.au) and **Flight Centre** (☎ 133 133; www.flightcentre.com.au) have offices throughout Australia. For online bookings, try www.travel.com.au.

In New Zealand both **Flight Centre** (☎ 0800 243 544; www.flightcentre.co.nz) and **STA Travel** (☎ 0508 782 872; www.statravel.co.nz) have branches throughout the country. The site www.travel.co.nz is recommended for online bookings.

Central Asia & the Caucasus

There is a small but rapidly growing number of flights from the Middle East to Central Asian and Caucasus destinations. There are regular flights between Istanbul and Almaty (Kazakhstan), Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan), Baku (Azerbaijan), Tashkent (Uzbekistan) and Ashgabat (Turkmenistan) with either Turkish Airlines or the national airlines of each country. There are also flights to these destinations from Tehran with either Iran Air or Iran Aseman, as well as services from Mashhad to Ashgabat, Bishkek and Dushanbe.

From Tel Aviv, Uzbekistan Airways flies to Tashkent.

Europe

Although London is the travel discount capital of Europe, there are several other cities where you'll find a range of good deals, particularly Frankfurt. Generally there's not much variation in air fare prices for departures from the main European cities. All the major airlines are usually offering some sort of deal and travel agencies generally have a number of special offers, so shop around.

Look out for cheap charter flight packages from western Europe to destinations in Turkey, Egypt and Israel. Some of the flight-plus-accommodation packages offered by travel agencies can work out to be cheaper than a standard flight, although often the dates can be very restrictive.

Afriqiyah Airways flies to Tripoli from London Gatwick, Brussels, Paris and Geneva, while Mahan Air offer flights to Tehran from Birmingham and Düsseldorf. Another option is to fly with Point-Afrique

from Paris or Marseilles to the Libyan oasis town of Ghat (late October to early May only).

MAINLAND EUROPE

Most European carriers fly into the major cities of the Middle East (usually several times a week); the most frequent connections are with Paris, Frankfurt, Rome and Athens. Unless you're travelling on a charter flight, expect to pay around €500 as a minimum, but you could pay a whole lot more.

Recommended agencies on the mainland: **Airfair** (☎ 020 620 5121; www.airfair.nl; Netherlands) **Barcelo Viajes** (☎ 902 116 226; www.barceloviajes.com; Spain)

CTS Viaggi (☎ 06 462 0431; www.cts.it; Italy)

Expedia (www.expedia.de; Germany)

Nouvelles Frontières (☎ 0825 000 747; www.nouvelles-frontieres.fr; France)

STA Travel (☎ 01805 456 422; www.statravel.de; Germany)

Voyageurs du Monde (☎ 01 40 15 11 15; www.vdm.com; France)

UK

You can get to the Middle East on direct flights from almost any European city of any size. For the past few years fares to the region have remained fairly steady and the cheapest return fares you can expect to find (including all taxes) are around UK£235 to Istanbul, UK£250 to Cairo or Tel Aviv and UK£275 to Damascus.

As far as Middle East flights are concerned, there are few dedicated specialists and the best bet is to call **STA Travel** (☎ 020-7361 6142; www.statravel.co.uk) and **Traillfinders** (☎ 020-7938 3939; www.traillfinders.co.uk), both of which have branches throughout the UK.

If you're looking to fly into Egypt then it's also worth calling **Soliman Travel** (☎ 020-7244 6855; www.solimantravel.com), a reputable Egypt specialist that often manages to undercut the competition.

USA & Canada

There are more flights from the USA than from Canada, but still not that many: Royal Jordanian flies between New York/Chicago and Amman; EgyptAir flies between New York/Los Angeles and Cairo; while El Al connects Tel Aviv to a number of US cities as well as Montreal. Expect to pay around US\$1400 for a return ticket.

Otherwise, it may work out cheaper to go via Europe or even fly to London and buy a ticket from a bucket shop there; the latter option would depend on the fare to London and the time you would have to spend in London waiting for a flight out.

Council Travel (☎ 800-226 8624; www.ciee.org; 205 E 42 St, New York, NY 10017), America's largest student travel organisation, has around 60 offices in the USA. Call the head office for the office nearest you or visit its website. **STA Travel** (☎ 800-777 0112; www.statravel.com) has offices in many major US cities; call the toll-free 800 number for office locations or visit its website.

Travel CUTS (☎ 800-667 2887; www.travelcuts.com) is Canada's national student travel agency and has offices in all major cities.

LAND Border Crossings

Border crossings in the Middle East can be slow and it can take hours to pass through immigration and customs formalities, especially if you bring your own car. Make certain that you have all the required documentation with you. Showing patience, politeness and good humour is likely to speed up the process. For further information see Visas, p653; Bring Your Own Vehicle, p668; as well as the Transport sections of each individual country chapter.

If travelling independently overland to or from the Middle East – whether hitching, cycling, driving your own car or riding by train or by bus – you can approach the region overland from Africa, the Caucasus, Central Asia, Europe or Pakistan.

AFRICA

Travel between Africa and the Middle East was extremely problematic at the time of writing. The Nile ferry connecting Aswan in Egypt to Wadi Halfa in Sudan is running, but much of Sudan is unsafe for travel. Most East African overlanders skip Sudan by flying from Egypt to Addis Ababa in Ethiopia; but, recent clashes on the Eritrean–Ethiopian border have now placed a big question mark over the validity of this option.

Many travellers fly to Tunisia (for which there are numerous cheap flights) and then cross the Tunisia–Libya border by land at the Ras al-Jedir border post (the only border crossing open to travellers). There are

numerous buses and shared taxis between Tripoli and Tunis, although most travellers take a Tunisian shared taxi from Sfax or Ben Guerdane as far as the border where their Libyan tour company will meet them and arrange onward travel.

Some hardy souls make the long desert crossing into Niger via the Libyan border post at Tumu. Other than overloaded and downright dangerous trucks carrying African immigrants, there is no regular public transport between the two countries, and the journey to Agadez in Niger – which involves crossing the Sahara desert – is only for the well equipped and well prepared. Visas are not available at the border in either direction, so make sure you have one before setting out.

Libya's borders with Algeria, Chad and Sudan are not open to foreigners.

THE CAUCASUS

Armenia & Georgia

The main border crossing from Turkey into Georgia is at Sarp on the Black Sea coast, near Hopa, but you can also cross at Posof, near Ardahan. The Sarp border crossing is open 24 hours a day, but Posof closes at night.

From Trabzon otogar there are daily bus services to Tiflis (Tbilisi, Georgia, €25, 20 hours) and on to Erivan (Armenia, €30, 25 hours) via the Sarp border crossing. You can also take a minibus from Trabzon to Sarp (€7) and on the other side of the border you can take a taxi to Batumi (about €15).

A certain amount of extortion seems to be a fact of life at these borders, especially when coming back into Turkey.

In Turkey, the train line from Ankara to Erzurum runs as far as Kars but at the time of writing the Turkish–Armenian border was closed to foreign travellers.

The border between Armenia and Iran is open at Agarak (Armenia) and Norduz (Iran), about an hour by private taxi (IR60,000) from Jolfa, in northwestern Iran. The border is theoretically open 24 hours and Armenian visas are available there for US\$30, or US\$20 for a three-day transit visa; Iranian visas are not. It's faster and more fun to take public transport to either side of the border, but buses do run between Tabriz (IR150,000) or Tehran (IR250,000) in Iran and Yerevan, the capital of Armenia, several times weekly.

Azerbaijan

Some of the buses from Trabzon to Tbilisi continue to Baku (US\$75, plus a US\$10 'tip' payable on the bus if you're going to Tbilisi, US\$25 for Baku). It's a fairly gruelling journey with a three- to four-hour delay at Sarp on the border with Turkey and Georgia – mainly because the Georgians and Azerbaijanis buy up and take home half of Turkey. Trabzon to Tbilisi takes the best part of 19 hours.

You can also cross from Turkey to the Azerbaijani enclave of Nakhichevan via the remote Borualan/Sadarak border post, 105km southeast of İğdir. Once in Nakhichevan, you'll have to fly across Armenian-occupied Nagorno-Karabakh to reach Baku, the Azerbaijani capital. From İğdir, there are about seven daily minibuses to the border (€4, three hours).

You can enter Iran with little hassle at the twin towns of Astara between 8.30am and 6.30pm – visas are *not* available at the border (for the address of the Azerbaijani embassy in Tehran see p244). Astara is accessed via hops from Rasht in the west or Ardabil and Tabriz to the south. Alternatively, direct buses between the Azerbaijani capital of Baku and Tabriz (IR150,000, eight hours) or Tehran (IR150,000, 16 hours) leave the Iranian cities nightly, but the border wait can be long.

CENTRAL ASIA

Afghanistan

Crossing the Afghan border (open 7.30am to 4.30pm) is easy at Dogharon, southeast of Taybad in northeastern Iran. Most travellers take the direct bus between the Mashhad terminal and Herat (IR55,000, eight to 12 hours), the major city in northeastern Afghanistan. This service is prone to lengthy delays at the border but is safer and easier. Alternatively, take a bus to Taybad (three hours), a savari the 20km to the border, walk across and find something going to Herat. Visas are available in two days in Mashhad (see p244), but note that Afghanistan is definitely not for the faint-hearted or inexperienced.

Turkmenistan

There are two main crossings between Iran and Turkmenistan. Visas are not available on arrival in either direction. The Bajgiran border is easiest, with regular savaris (long-

distance taxis, IR20,000 per person, 3½ hours) leaving from 100m north of Azadi Sq in Mashhad, and regular buses from the terminal running via Quchan. You'll have to change transport at the border (open 24 hours, but best between 8am and 6pm), and on the Turkmen side it's a short but costly hop to the capital, Ashgabat.

The relatively quiet border (open from 8am to 5pm) at Sarakhs (Iran) and Saraghs (Turkmenistan) is easy to reach by bus, savari or train from Mashhad although the train times can be annoying. From the Turkmen side, occasional buses and savaris run to Mary (three to four hours).

Travelling in either direction you must obtain a visa in advance.

EUROPE

One train a day heads from İstanbul to Bucharest (17 hours) and then on to Budapest (31 hours), with connections elsewhere in Europe. There have been reports of long delays and hassle, especially for women, at the Bulgarian border.

Despite the romantic appeal of train journeys, getting to Turkey overland is usually cheaper and faster by bus. Several Turkish bus lines, including Ulusoy, Varan and Bosfor, offer reliable and quite comfortable services between İstanbul and major European cities such as Frankfurt, Munich and Vienna for around US\$80 one way. These services travel via Greece and the ferry to Italy, thereby avoiding any hassle at the Bulgarian border.

Bulgaria & Other Eastern European Countries

The main border crossing between Bulgaria and Turkey is at busy Kapitan-Andreevo/Kapikule, 18km west of Edirne. It's open 24 hours.

From İstanbul, there are regular bus services to Sofia and Plovdiv (about €25), transiting the border post at Kapikule. Or you can head for the Bulgarian border crossing at Kapikule from Edirne (€0.50).

If you plan on leaving the Middle East via Bulgaria, nationals of the USA and the EU are admitted without a visa for stays of less than 30 days. Travellers of other nationalities (including Aussies, Kiwis and Canadians) need a transit visa, which is issued at the border for US\$68.

A few bus services are offered from İstanbul otogar (bus station) to Macedonia (€30), Kosovo (€35) and Romania (€30). These all pass via the Kapıkule border post.

From İstanbul's Sirkeci Railway Station, there's the daily *Bosfor Ekspresi* service to Budapest via Sofia and Bucharest.

Greece

The crossing points between western Thrace in Greece and eastern Thrace in Turkey are at Kipi/İpsala, and Kastanies/Pazarkule, near Edirne.

At least six weekly buses travel from Athens' Peloponnese train station to İstanbul (around US\$85; 22 hours). You can also pick up the bus in Thessaloniki (around US\$60) and at Alexandroupolis (US\$25). Alternatively, you can make your own way to Alexandroupolis and take a service from the intercity bus station to the border town of Kipi (US\$3, thrice daily). You can't walk across the border but it's easy enough to hitch (you may be able to get a lift all the way to İstanbul). Otherwise, take a bus to İpsala (5km east beyond the border) or Keşan (30km east beyond the border), from where there are many buses to the capital.

Greece's sole rail link with Turkey is the daily Thessaloniki–İstanbul service. The train leaves İstanbul late in the evening, arriving in Thessaloniki late the next afternoon; in the reverse direction, it leaves Thessaloniki late in the evening. Although the 1400km trip is supposed to take 16

hours, delays of more than five or six hours at the border are common, especially on the eastbound leg, and the train can get uncomfortably crowded and hot. Only 2nd-class seats (US\$40) are available.

PAKISTAN

The only proper crossing for foreigners is between Mirjaveh (Iran) and Taftan (Pakistan). It's pretty smooth as long as your papers are in order and you don't take the train, which might see you stranded at the border for ever as your fellow passengers are exhaustively searched. This would be a fate worse than death, as Taftan has been described, not unfairly, as hell on earth. It's best to take a bus (IR5500) or savari (about IR15,000) between Zahedan (p236) and the border, and a bus for the mind-numbingly long trip between Taftan and Quetta. Bargain hard! The border opens from about 7am to 4.30pm Iranian time.

Car & Motorcycle

Anyone who is planning to take their own vehicle with them needs to check in advance what spare parts and petrol are likely to be available (see p669). A number of documents are also required (see also the boxed text, below):

Green card Issued by insurers. Insurance for some countries is only obtainable at the border.

International Driving Permit (IDP) Although most foreign licences are acceptable in Middle Eastern countries, an IDP issued by your local automobile association is highly

recommended, and is required for entry with a vehicle at some border crossings.

Vehicle registration documents In addition to carrying all ownership papers, check with your insurer whether you're covered for the countries you intend to visit and whether third-party cover is included.

SEA

Ferries shuttle reasonably regularly between southern Europe and Israel, Turkey and Egypt. There are other less frequented routes connecting Egypt with Sudan and the Arabian Peninsula.

As well as the services listed below, some cruise liners call at Middle Eastern ports such as Suez, Alexandria, Tripoli, Benghazi or Tobruk, but these are beyond the scope of this book. A good travel agent should be able to tell you what's available in the season you are travelling.

Unless stated otherwise, all services run in both directions and all fares quoted below are single. A slight discount may apply on return tickets as well as student, youth or child fares on some lines. Schedules tend to change at least annually according to demand; fares, too, often fluctuate according to season, especially on the Mediterranean routes.

Although vehicles can be shipped on most of the following routes, bookings may have to be made some time in advance. The charge usually depends on the length or volume of the vehicle and should be checked with the carrier. As a rule, motorcycles cost almost nothing to ship while bicycles are free.

You're unlikely to regret taking an adequate supply of food and drink with you on any of these ships; even if it is available on board you're pretty stuck if it doesn't agree with you or your budget.

Between Greece, Cyprus and Israel & the Palestinian Territories

Twice-weekly car and passenger ferry services connect Haifa and Piraeus (the port for Athens), with a stop at Limassol (Cyprus). For more information about sailing times and fares, contact **Rosenfeld Shipping** (☎ 04-861 3671; reservations@rosenfeld.net) in Israel.

At the time of writing, boats depart from Haifa at 8pm Monday and Thursday and arrive in Limassol (US\$160/285/225/125 for passenger/jeep/car/motorcycle) around 10 hours later, with a further 12-hour jour-

ney on to Piraeus (US\$250/460/385/277). Fares include port taxes, war-risk taxes and all breakfasts and dinners; return fares are about 20% less than two one-way fares.

Between Italy, Greece & Turkey

Private ferries link Turkey's Aegean coast and the Greek islands, which are in turn linked by air or boat to Athens. Services are usually daily in summer, several times a week in spring and autumn and perhaps just once a week in winter.

From Çeşme, situated about 85km west of İzmir, **Marmara Lines** (www.marmaralines.com; per person from €110; 2½ days) ferries run twice weekly to Brindisi via Corfu and Patras in Greece (once weekly in winter).

Marmara Lines also connects Ancona in Italy from Çeşme between April and November (from €200, 2½ days).

Daily boats operate from Ayvalik to Lesvos (Greece) from June to September (€40/50 one way/return). There's at least one boat a week, even in winter. Çeşme is a transit point to the Greek island of Chios, 10km away across the water. In summer, there are daily ferries to Chios (€35/40 one way/return), and at least three weekly services in winter. Buy your ticket from any travel agency at the harbour.

All Kuşadası travel agencies sell tickets to the Greek island of Samos. There's at least one daily boat to/from Samos year-round (€30 one way, €35 same-day return). In summer, daily hydrofoils (€33 same-day return) and ferries (€23 same-day return), link Bodrum with Kos (Greece); in winter services shrink to three times weekly. In summer, there are also two weekly services to Rhodes (Rhodos, €45 one way, €50 same-day return); check with the ferry offices near the castle. From Marmaris, hydrofoils to Rhodes operate twice daily in summer (once or twice weekly in winter) for €40 one way/same-day return (one hour). Buy your ticket in any Marmaris travel agency.

Between Cyprus & Turkey

From Alanya, there are ferries to Girne (Northern Cyprus) three times a week from April to October for a return fare of €83 including tax.

If you have a multiple-entry visa for Turkey you should be able to cross over to Northern Cyprus and back again without

CARNETS

A carnet de passage is like a passport for your car, a booklet that is stamped on arrival at and departure from a country to ensure that you export the vehicle again after you've imported it. It's usually issued by an automobile association in the country where the vehicle is registered. Most countries of the Middle East require a carnet although rules change frequently.

The sting in the tail with a carnet is that you usually have to lodge a deposit to secure it. If you default on the carnet – that is, you don't have an export stamp to match the import one – then the country in question can claim your deposit, which can be up to 300% of the new value of the vehicle. You can get around this problem with bank guarantees or carnet insurance, but you still have to fork out in the end if you default.

Should the worst occur and your vehicle is irretrievably damaged in an accident or catastrophic breakdown, you'll have to argue it out with customs officials. Having a vehicle stolen can be even worse, as you may be suspected of having sold it.

The carnet may also need to specify any expensive spare parts that you're planning to carry with you, such as a gearbox, which is designed to prevent any spare-part importation rackets. Contact your local automobile association for details about all necessary documentation at least three months in advance.

buying a new one. However, if your visa has expired, you should anticipate long queues at immigration.

Between Russia & Turkey

Travelling from Trabzon, there are two to three weekly ferry services to Sochi (from €50 one way).

Between Cyprus & Egypt

From Port Said, boats to Limassol in Cyprus depart twice weekly from May to November. A ticket costs US\$120 one way. For information and tickets, visit one of the many shipping agencies in Port Said. These include **Canal Tours** (☎ 066-332 1874, 012 798 6338; canalatours@bec.com.eg).

Between Sudan, Saudi Arabia & Egypt

Telestar Tours (in Cairo ☎ 02-794 4600, in Suez ☎ 062-332 6251) runs a ferry between Port Sudan and Suez three times per week. Tickets cost E£300 one way.

The **Nile River Valley Transport Corporation** (in Aswan ☎ 097-303 348, in Cairo ☎ 02-575 9058) runs one passenger ferry per week from Aswan to Wadi Halfa. One-way tickets cost E£383.50 for 1st class with bed in a cabin; E£236 for an airline seat and E£164.50 for deck class. At the time of research the ferry was departing on Monday at around noon. The trip takes between 16 and 24 hours. Passengers should arrive at about 8.30am to allow time to clear customs and fight for a decent seat.

To board the ferry, you must have a valid Sudanese visa in your passport.

Telestar Tours also runs an irregular ferry service between Suez and Jeddah (about 36 hours). Tickets cost E£300/400/500/600 for deck/3rd/2nd/1st class (or the US dollar equivalent). The ferry also carries cars. Note that getting a berth during the haj is virtually impossible.

There's also a thrice weekly fast ferry (adult/child E£300/200, three hours) between Hurghada and Duba in Saudi Arabia. You must be at the port three hours before departure. For information, contact an agent for **International Fast Ferries Co** (in Hurghada ☎ 065-344 7571; www.internationalfastferries.com) or enquire at the Hurghada port.

You will not be allowed to board any of these services unless you have a valid Saudi visa in your passport.

Between Iran & the Arabian Peninsula

Iran's Valfajre 8 Shipping Company has regular but unpredictable ferries between several Gulf ports. For travellers, the Bandar-e Abbas–Dubai (US\$55 in 1st class, one way) fast boat service is the most convenient, though flying is easier and cheaper. Slow boat services between Bushehr and Kuwait (US\$64), Qatar (US\$43) and Bahrain (US\$45) could also be useful. For schedules and prices, see www.vesc.net.

TOURS

International tour companies offer a host of tour possibilities for visiting the Middle East – everything from a package tour by the beach to a more gruelling six-week overland expedition.

Remember also that Libya can only be visited as part of an organised tour; for a list of companies offering tours to Libya see p506.

For tour companies specialising in individual countries, see the Transport section of the relevant country chapter.

Australia & Elsewhere

In Australia and elsewhere, most of the companies that offer tours to the Middle East do so as agents for the UK packages; check out the websites that are listed under the UK companies for the local affiliate closest to you.

In Australia, there are also a few interesting home-grown outfits:

Passport Travel (☎ 03-9867 3888; www.travelcentre.com.au) Middle East specialist (especially Libya, Egypt and Jordan) with a focus on arranging itineraries for individuals or groups.

Ya'lla Tours (☎ 03-9510 2844; yallamel@yallatours.com.au) Wide variety of package and private arrangement tours to the Middle East.

An innovative Netherlands-based company is **Idrisi Travel** (☎ 0492-340632; info@idrisitravel.co.uk), which specialises in walking and archaeology with tours to Jordan and Libya.

UK

Adventure Company (☎ 0870 794 1009; www.adventurecompany.co.uk) Small-group 'adventure' tours with structured itineraries to Egypt and Jordan.

Crusader Travel (☎ 020-8744 0474; www.crusadertravel.com) Diving and adventure tours from Egypt, Israel and the Palestinian Territories and Turkey.

Dragoman (☎ 0870 499 4475; www.dragoman.com)

The largest of the overland companies takes in Turkey, Syria, Jordan, Libya and Egypt, not to mention just about everywhere else on the planet.

Economic Expeditions (☎ 020-7262 0177; www.economicexpeditions.com) Istanbul to Cairo, or vice versa.

Exodus (☎ 020-8675 5550; www.exodus.co.uk) Overland and adventure trips covering Egypt, Iran, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Syria and Turkey.

Explore Worldwide (☎ 0870 333 4001; www.exploreworldwide.com) Small group exploratory holidays that take in Egypt, Iran, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and Turkey.

Imaginative Traveller (☎ 0800 316 2717; www.imaginative-traveller.com) Highly professional, established outfit with a vast range of tours offered to Egypt, Iran, Jordan, Syria and Turkey.

Kumuka (☎ 020-7937 8855; www.kumuka.com) Masses of routes offered including dedicated explorations of Egypt, Jordan or Syria.

Oasis Overland (☎ 01963 363 400; www.oasisoverland.co.uk) Turkey, Syria, Jordan and Egypt.

On the Go (☎ 020-7371 1113; www.onthegotours.com) Egypt and Turkey specialist with the odd detour into Jordan.

GETTING AROUND

This chapter should be used for general planning. If you want to travel, for instance, between Turkey and Israel and the Palestinian Territories, this chapter will give you an overview of the options: air, land or sea, train versus bus, and so on. Then, if you decide to go by bus from Istanbul to Damascus, from

Damascus to Amman, and Amman to Jerusalem you should begin by going to the Getting There & Away section at the back of the Turkey chapter for further details on buses to Syria. The destination-specific sections will tell where the border crossing points are.

Once in Syria, consult that chapter's Getting There & Away section for the best way to continue to Amman in Jordan. Simple.

One particular point to note: at the time of writing, Libya could only be visited as part of an organised tour. Although public transport exists throughout Libya, most of your transport will be organised by your tour company once you reach the border.

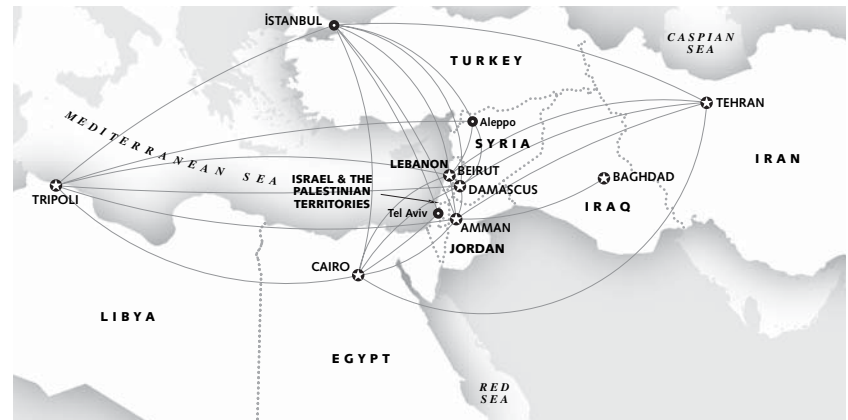
AIR

With no regional rail network to speak of and distances that make the bus a disconcerting test of endurance, flying is certainly the most user-friendly method of transport in the Middle East. Tickets are more flexible than buses or trains, schedules more rigidly adhered to, refunds easier to get and information more readily available.

Flying isn't a safe option for getting to or from Iraq, nor is flying possible between Israel and the Palestinian Territories and most other Middle Eastern countries, except for Egypt, Jordan and Turkey. But, these exceptions aside, almost every Middle Eastern capital is linked to each of the others.

If you're in a capital city, it's usually worth buying your ticket through a reputable travel agency. It can give you all the available

MIDDLE EAST AIR ROUTES



choices without you having to visit several different airline offices. The price you pay will usually be the same, if not less.

Travel agency addresses are found in the Information sections of individual cities.

Airlines in the Middle East

Flights are usually operated by state airlines, most of which are reasonable, although an increasing number of charter and private airlines fly around the Middle East.

Of the national airlines, when it comes to service, punctuality and safety, El Al (Israel), Royal Jordanian, Turkish Airlines and Middle East Airlines (Lebanon) are probably the pick of the bunch, while Iran Air and Syrianair have reasonably solid if unimpressive reputations. Libyan Arab Airlines will get you from A to B but not much else and don't expect to arrive on time, while EgyptAir is probably best avoided.

Many of the private airlines that now operate – including Afriqiyah Airways, Mahan Air and Iran Aseman – connect Middle Eastern capitals and provincial centres to cities beyond the Middle East that are not covered by national airlines.

For a full list of airlines flying to and from the Middle East, see p657. Many of these airlines also fly domestically within the Middle East.

Some others:

Al-Buraq (☎ 021-4444811; www.buraqair.com; Libya) Connects Tripoli to Benghazi, Damascus and Aleppo.

Arkia (☎ 03-699 2222; www.arkia.co.il; Israel) Connects Tel Aviv, Eilat and Haifa and has international charters to Jerusalem.

Atlasjet (☎ 0216-444 0387; www.atlasjet.com; Turkey) Domestic Turkish services.

Fly Air (☎ 0212-444 4359; www.flyair.com.tr; Turkey) Flights within Turkey.

Israir (☎ 03-795 5777; www.israir.co.il; Israel) Connects Tel Aviv, Eilat and Haifa.

Onur Air (☎ 0212-662 9797; www.onurair.com.tr; Turkey) Extensive domestic flights within Turkey.

Detailed information on all airlines' safety records (including reams of statistics) can be found at <http://www.airsafe.com/index.html>.

Air Passes

Emirates (www.emirates.com) offers the 'Arabian Airpass' that allows cut-price travel around the Middle East. To qualify you need to

buy a flight to Dubai. Onward flight 'coupons' (a minimum of two, maximum of six) are then available to cities such as Cairo, Amman, Beirut, Damascus or Tehran. The coupons are valid for three months from when the first coupon is redeemed. Prices are based upon zones, with the above cities coming within Zone 3 (US\$120).

BICYCLE

Although the numbers doing it are small, cycling round the Middle East is a viable proposition, provided that cyclists are self-sufficient and able to carry litres of extra water.

Most of the people we spoke to reckoned that the most enjoyable cycling was in Turkey and Syria (this is backed up by letters from readers). Although hilly, the scenery in Turkey is particularly fine and accommodation is fairly easy to come by, even in the smallest villages. This is definitely not the case elsewhere, and in Syria in particular you have to expect to spend the odd night in a tent. In Turkey if you get tired of pedalling it's also no problem to have your bike transported in the luggage hold of the big modern buses.

One big plus about cycling through the region is the fact that cyclists are usually given fantastic welcomes – a trademark of the Middle East anyway – showered with food and drink. Cyclists in Syria frequently receive invitations from people along the way to come home, meet the family, eat and stay over. Even the police are helpful and friendly. There are a couple of exceptions – along Jordan's King's Hwy and in Sinai kids

throw stones at cyclists (maybe because of the cycling shorts, we don't know) – but these are minor blips of annoyance.

Aside from such isolated cases, by far the major difficulty cited by all cyclists was the heat. This is at its worst from June to August and cycling in these summer months is definitely not recommended. May to mid-June and September through October are the best times. Even then you're advised to make an early morning start and call it a day by early afternoon.

There are bicycle repair shops in most major towns and the locals are excellent 'bush mechanics' with all but the most modern or sophisticated equipment.

The following additional tips may help:

- Carry a couple of extra chain links, a chain breaker, spokes, a spoke key, two inner tubes, tyre levers and a repair kit, a flat-head and Phillips-head screwdriver, and Allen keys and spanners to fit all the bolts on your bike.
- Check the bolts daily and carry spares.
- Fit as many water bottles to your bike as you can – it gets hot.
- Make sure the bike's gearing will get you over the hills.
- Confine your panniers to a maximum weight of 15kg.
- Carrying the following equipment in your panniers is recommended: a two-person tent (weighing about 1.8kg) that can also accommodate the bike where security is a concern; a sleeping bag rated to 0°C and an inflatable mattress; a small camping stove; cooking pot; utensils; a water filter (two microns) and a compact torch.
- Wear cycling shorts with a chamois bum and cleated cycling shoes.
- Don't worry about filling the panniers with food as it is plentiful and fresh along the route.

BOAT

Practicality is the essence of Middle East ferry services, not luxury. Even in 1st class you shouldn't expect your voyage to be a pleasure cruise, while deck class often means just that. In summer conditions may be a little too hot for many people. While food and drink of some sort may be available on board, many passengers prefer to take their own.

Vehicles can usually be shipped on the services listed below, but advance arrangements may have to be made. For the latest information, get in touch with the head office or local agency of the respective company some time in advance.

Two ferry services operate between Nuweiba in Egypt and Aqaba in Jordan. The fast-ferry service from Egypt (adult/child US\$55/39) takes one hour, while the slow ferry (adult/child US\$41/29) makes the journey in 2½ to three hours. From Jordan, the adult prices for the fast/slow ferry are US\$36/25.

There is also, in theory at least, a twice-weekly catamaran trip between Aqaba and Sharm el-Sheikh (officially US\$45, three hours), but this wasn't operating at the time of research.

For more information on these ferry services, see p406 and p177.

BUS

Buses are the most reliable, comfortable and (for longer journeys, at least) popular means of land transport in the Middle East. Throughout most of the region buses will take you to almost anywhere of any size; on many routes there may be no other form of public transport.

The cost and comfort of bus travel vary enormously throughout the region. One most typical nuisance, however, is the Middle Eastern bus drivers' fondness for loud videos (a fondness presumably shared by local passengers); sleep is almost always impossible. Another potential source of discomfort is that in most Middle Eastern countries the concept of a 'nonsmoking bus' is that these are things that other regions have.

Most Middle Eastern countries can be reached by taking a direct international bus from other parts of the region. For example, Damascus has several daily bus services to Istanbul (30 hours), Ankara (14 hours), Beirut (four hours) and Amman (seven hours), while Aleppo also has daily services to Istanbul (22 hours), Ankara (10 hours) and Beirut (six to seven hours). From Tehran, there are regular services to Ankara (28 hours), Istanbul (35 hours) and twice-weekly services to Damascus. From Amman it's also possible to travel to the King Hussein Bridge (for Israel and the

CYCLING CONTACTS

If you're considering cycling in the Middle East, but have a few pressing questions that first need answering, you can post your query on the Thorn Tree on Lonely Planet's website (www.lonelyplanet.com) under the Activities branch. There's a strong likelihood somebody will respond with the information that you're looking for.

Alternatively, you could contact the **Cyclists' Touring Club** (CTC; ☎ 01483-417 217; www.ctc.org.uk), a UK-based organisation that offers good tips and information sheets on cycling in different parts of the world; the website itself is quite useful.

Palestinian Territories; 45 minutes), Cairo (a daily bus-ferry combination; 16 hours) or even Baghdad (14 hours), although the latter journey is chronically unsafe. There are also services from Cairo to Jerusalem and from Cairo to Tel Aviv via Sinai (at least 10 hours).

For further details of these services see the Getting There & Away sections of the relevant cities and the Transport sections of the individual country chapters.

Even in those countries without any international bus services it's usually possible to get to at least one neighbouring country by using domestic services, making your own way across the border and picking up another domestic service or taxi in the next country. This method is usually cheaper and it avoids one of the big problems of international services: waiting for the vehicle to clear customs at each border, which can mean delays of several hours. However, if you're planning on using domestic buses make sure that there will be onward transport on the other side of the border.

Reservations

It's always advisable to book bus seats in advance at the bus station, which is usually the only ticket outlet and source of reliable information about current services. Reservations are a must over the Muslim weekend (Friday) as well as during public holidays (see p647).

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Bringing your own car to the Middle East will give you a lot more freedom but it's certainly not for everyone. For more information on the paperwork required for bringing your vehicle to the Middle East, see p662.

Throughout the Middle East, motorcycles are fairly popular as a means of racing around in urban areas, but they are little used as long-distance transport. If you do decide to ride a motorcycle through the Middle East, try to take one of the more popular Japanese models if you want to stand any chance of finding spare parts. Even then, make sure your motorcycle is in very good shape before setting out. Motorcycles can be shipped or, often, loaded as luggage on to trains.

Bring Your Own Vehicle

The advantages of having your own vehicle are many:

- You aren't tied to schedules.
- You can choose your own company, set your own pace, take the scenic route, declare your vehicle a smoking or non-smoking zone and you won't be at the mercy of dishonest taxi drivers or have to fight for a place on a bus.
- You can avoid all the hassles that go with carrying your world on your back.
- Fuel is much cheaper than at home.

That said, it's difficult to imagine a route through the Middle East that would justify the expense and hassle of bringing a car and getting it out again. Indeed, for the vast majority of short-term visitors to the Middle East, the advantages of being attached to one vehicle are far outweighed by the disadvantages. Primary among these are:

- The expense of getting hold of a carnet de passage.
- The often hair-raising driving in unfamiliar territory.
- The variability in the quality of the roads themselves.
- The sheer distance to travel between places of interest.
- The mountains of paperwork and red tape before you leave home – documents usually take a month or more to obtain, and just finding out the current regulations can be difficult. It's best to get in touch with your automobile association (eg AA or RAC in the UK) at least three months in advance.
- The millstone-around-the-neck worry of serious accident, breakdown or theft.
- The difficulty of establishing a feasible route through the Middle East. This can be hard enough if you're relying on public transport, but at least there's nearly always the alternative of flying if a particular overland route proves too difficult or dangerous. This is hardly an option if you have a car with you, and air freight even a motorcycle isn't cheap. Selling or dumping a temporarily imported vehicle in the Middle East is more or less ruled out by customs regulations.

To circumvent the latter disadvantage, it's at least theoretically possible to have your

car put under customs seal in one country and to return for it later, but this is a hassle to arrange, requires backtracking and somewhat negates the point of bringing a vehicle in the first place. Car ferries can get around some of these problems, but shipping a car isn't cheap, often requires an advance booking and won't help you out in every eventuality. Note that the rules and conventions covered here may not apply if you stay more than three months in any one country, or if you're going for any purpose other than tourism.

Driving Licence

If you plan to drive, get an IDP from your local automobile association. An IDP is compulsory for foreign drivers and motorcyclists in Egypt, Iran, Iraq and Syria. Most foreign (or national) licences are acceptable in Israel and the Palestinian Territories, Lebanon, Libya and Turkey, and for foreign-registered vehicles in Jordan. However, even in these places an IDP is recommended. IDPs are valid for one year only.

Fuel & Spare Parts

Mechanical failure can be a problem as spare parts – or at least official ones – are often unobtainable. Fear not, ingenuity often compensates for factory parts; your mechanic back home will either have a heart attack or learn new techniques when you show them what's gone on under your hood in the Middle East.

Generally, Land Rovers, Volkswagens, Range Rovers, Mercedes and Chevrolets are the cars for which spare parts are most likely to be available, although in recent years Japan has been a particularly vigorous exporter of vehicles to the Middle East. In countries such as Iran, Syria and Iraq, spare parts for US vehicles may be very hard to find. One tip is to ask your vehicle manufacturer for a list of any authorised service centres it has in the countries you plan to visit. The length of this is likely to be a pretty good reflection of how easy it is to get spare parts on your travels.

Usually two grades of petrol are available; if in doubt get the more expensive one. Petrol stations are few and far between on many desert roads. Away from the main towns, it's advisable to fill up whenever you get the chance. Locally produced maps often

indicate the locations of petrol stations. Diesel isn't readily available in every Middle Eastern country, nor is unleaded petrol. On the plus side, petrol is wonderfully cheap in many countries, especially Iran and Libya.

Hire

Car hire is possible in all Middle Eastern countries, and international hire companies such as **Hertz** (www.hertz.com), **Avis** (www.avis.com) and **Europcar** (www.europcar.com) are represented in many large towns. Local companies are usually cheaper, but the cars of international companies are often better maintained and come with a better back-up service if problems arise. Local companies (eg those offering 4WD vehicles in Libya) sometimes carry the advantage of including a driver for a similar cost to hiring the car alone. A good place to find competitive rates is **Imakoo Cars** (www.imakoo.com/uk/directory-in.php/middle-east/), a clearing house for cheap rates of international companies with services in Lebanon, Turkey, Israel and the Palestinian Territories, Jordan, Syria, Iran and Iraq.

Reputable tour agencies can also be a good source of cars, offering competitive rates, decent cars and often a driver thrown in for little extra – usually the best option for short-term travellers. Some agencies can arrange vans, minibuses and buses for groups, but most deal only in cars; very few rent out motorcycles or bicycles.

To hire a car, you'll need any or all of the following: a photocopy of your passport and visa; deposit or credit card imprint; and your driving licence or IDP. The minimum age varies between 21 and 25; the latter is most common, particularly with international companies.

Always make sure whether insurance is included in the hire price, familiarise yourself with the policy, and don't hire a car unless it's insured for every eventuality.

Before hiring a self-drive vehicle, ask yourself seriously how well you think you can cope with the local driving conditions and whether you know your way around well enough to make good use of one. Also compare the cost with that of hiring a taxi for the same period.

Insurance

Insurance is compulsory in most Middle Eastern countries, apart from being highly

advisable. Given the large number of minor accidents, not to mention major ones, fully comprehensive insurance (as opposed to third-party) is strongly advised, both for your own and any hire vehicle. Car-hire companies customarily supply insurance, but check the cover and conditions carefully.

Make certain that you're covered for off-piste travel, as well as travel between Middle Eastern countries (if you're planning cross-border excursions). A locally acquired motorcycle licence is not valid under some policies.

In the event of an accident, make sure you submit the accident report as soon as possible to the insurance company or, if hiring, the car-hire company.

Road Conditions

The main roads are good or at least reasonable in most parts of the Middle East, but there are plenty of unsurfaced roads and the international roads are generally narrow and crowded. Conditions across the Middle East vary enormously, but in almost all cases, they'll be worse than you're used to back home. Turkey, Jordan and Israel and the Palestinian Territories probably have the best roads, but those in Iran, Lebanon, Syria and Libya adhere to the following rule: worse than they should be but probably better than you'd expect. Some of Egypt's roads are fine; others are bone-jarringly bad.

Road Hazards

One of your enduring (and hopefully not too painful) memories of the Middle East will undoubtedly be the driving standards: the driving is appalling by Western norms. Fatalism and high speed rule supreme. Many regulations are, in practice, purely cautionary. Car horns, used at the slightest provocation, take the place of caution and courtesy. Except in well-lit urban areas, try to avoid driving at night, as you may find your vehicle is the only thing on the road with lights.

In desert regions, particularly in Egypt and Libya, beware of wind-blown sand and wandering, free-range camels; the latter can be deadly at night.

Remember that an accident in the more remote parts of the region isn't always handled by your friendly insurance company. 'An eye for an eye' is likely to be the guiding principle of the other party and their

relatives, whether you're in the wrong or not. Don't hang around to ask questions or gawp. Of course we're not saying that you shouldn't report an accident, but it may be more prudent to head for the nearest police station than to wait at the scene.

Road Rules

You're unlikely even to know what the speed limit is on a particular road, let alone be forced to keep to it – the rules exist more in theory than they are enforced in reality. As a rule only non-Middle Easterners wear motorcycle helmets or car safety belts in most countries of the region, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't if one is available.

A warning triangle is required for vehicles (except motorcycles) in most Middle Eastern countries; in Turkey two triangles and a first-aid kit are compulsory.

In all countries, driving is on the right-hand side of the road (although many motorcyclists seem to consider themselves exempt from this convention) and the rules of when to give way (at least officially) are those which apply in Continental Europe.

HITCHING

Although many travellers hitchhike, it is never an entirely safe way of getting around and those who do so should understand that they are taking a small but potentially serious risk. There is no part of the Middle East where hitching can be recommended for unaccompanied women travellers. Just because we explain how hitching works doesn't mean we recommend you do it.

Hitching as commonly understood in the West hardly exists in the Middle East (except Israel and the Palestinian Territories). Although in most countries you'll often see people standing by the road hoping for a lift, they will nearly always expect (and be expected) to offer to pay. Hitching in the Middle Eastern sense is not so much an alternative to the public transport system as an extension of it, particularly in areas where there is no regular public transport. The going rate is often roughly the equivalent of the bus or shared taxi fare, but may be more if a driver takes you to an address or place off their route. You may well be offered free lifts from time to time, but you won't get very far if you set out deliberately to avoid paying for transport.

Hitching is not illegal in any Middle Eastern country and in many places it is extremely common. However, while it's quite normal for Middle Easterners, Asians and Africans, it isn't something Westerners are expected to do. In many Middle Eastern countries, Westerners who try to set a precedent of any kind often attract considerable (and sometimes unwelcome) attention. While this can work to your advantage, it can also lead to suspicion from the local police.

Throughout the Middle East a raised thumb is a vaguely obscene gesture. A common way of signalling that you want a lift is to extend your right hand, palm down.

TRAIN

No Middle Eastern country has an extensive railway network and there are few international services. Most railway lines in the region were built primarily for strategic or economic reasons, and many are either no longer in use or only carry freight. However, where there is a choice (such as in Iran and Egypt) the trains are usually much more comfortable than the buses and compare favourably in price. On the other hand, they are less frequent and usually slower, while many stations are some distance out of the town centres they serve.

In general, tickets are only sold at the station and reservations are either compulsory or highly recommended.

The only functioning international passenger services within the region travel between the following cities:

Amman–Damascus A twice-weekly train connects the capitals of Jordan and Syria. It's a slow diesel train with ancient carriages – see p406 and p522 for further details.

Damascus–Istanbul There is a once-weekly service between these cities (via Aleppo) – see p543 and p635 for details.

Tehran–Damascus The Tehran–Istanbul train splits at Van and carriages divert to Damascus – see p251 and p634 for further details.

Tehran–Istanbul This is a weekly train running via Sero, the border and Ankara – see p251 and p634 for more information.

LOCAL TRANSPORT Bus

In most cities and towns, a minibus or bus service operates. Fares are very cheap, fast, regular and run on fixed routes with, in some

cases, fixed stops. However, unless you're very familiar with the town, they can be difficult to get to grips with (few display their destinations and fewer still do so in English and they are often very crowded). Unless you can find an English-speaking local to help you out, your best bet is to stand along the footpath of a major thoroughfare heading in the direction you want to go and call out the local name (or the name of a landmark close to where you're heading) into the drivers' windows when they slow down.

Few countries have public minibuses to/from the airport, but top-end hotels and travel agencies (if you're taking a tour) can usually send a complimentary minibus if they're given sufficient advance notice.

Taxi

In the West, taxis are usually considered a luxury. In the Middle East they are often unavoidable. Some cities have no other form of urban public transport, while there are also many rural routes that are only feasible in a taxi or private vehicle.

Taxis are seemingly everywhere you look and, if you can't see one, try lingering on the footpath next to a major road and one will soon find you. Within no time, plenty of taxis will appear as if from nowhere and will soon toot their horns at you just in case you missed them, even if you're just trying to cross the street.

The way in which taxis operate varies widely from country to country, and often even from place to place within a country. So does the price. Different types of taxis are painted or marked in different ways, or known by different names, but, often, local people talking to foreigners in English will just use the blanket term 'taxi.' If you want to save money, it's important to be able to differentiate between the various kinds.

Details of local peculiarities are given in the Getting Around sections at the end of the country chapters.

REGULAR TAXI

Regular taxis (variously known as 'agency taxis', 'telephone taxis', 'private taxis' or 'special taxis') are found in almost every Middle Eastern town or city. Unlike shared taxis, you pay to have the taxi to yourself, either to take you to a preagreed destination or for a specified period of time. In some

TIPS FOR CATCHING TAXIS

On the whole, taxi drivers in the Middle East are helpful, honest and often humorous. Others – as in countries all over the world – find new arrivals too tempting a target for minor scams or a spot of overcharging. Here are a few tips:

- Not all taxi drivers speak English. Generally, in cities used to international travellers they will (or know enough to get by), but not otherwise. If you're having trouble, ask a local for help.
- Always negotiate a fare (or insist that the meter is used if it works) before jumping in. Town taxis occasionally have meters, which sometimes work and are even used from time to time. This book quotes local rates but, if in doubt, inquire at your point of departure.
- Don't rely on street names (there are often several versions and the driver may recognise your pronunciation of none of them). If you're going to a well-known destination (such as a big hotel), find out if it's close to a local landmark (check the Lonely Planet map if there is one) and give the driver the local name for the landmark. Even better, get someone to write down the name in Arabic or whatever the local language is.
- Make sure you're dropped off at the right place.
- Avoid using unlicensed cab drivers at airports.

places there's no other public transport, but in most, regular taxis exist alongside less expensive means of getting around (although these usually shut down overnight). They are primarily of use for transport within towns or on short rural trips, but in some countries hiring them for excursions of several hours is still cheap. They are also often the only way of reaching airports or seaports.

SHARED TAXI

A compromise between the convenience of a regular taxi and the economy of a bus, the shared taxi – the workhorse of the Middle Eastern road – picks up and drops off passengers at points along its (generally fixed) route and runs to no particular schedule. It's known by different names – collect, collective or service taxi in English, *servees* in Arabic, *sherut* in Hebrew, *dolmuş* in Turkish and just *taksī* in Farsi (Persian). Most shared taxis take up to four or five passengers, but some seat up to about 12 and are indistinguishable for most purposes from minibuses.

Shared taxis are much cheaper than private taxis and, once you get the hang of them, can be just as convenient. They are dearer than buses, but more frequent and usually faster, because they don't stop so often or for so long. They also tend to operate for longer hours than buses. They can be

used for urban, intercity or rural transport, but not necessarily all three in a particular place.

Fixed-route taxis wait at the point of departure until full or nearly full. Usually they pick up or drop off passengers anywhere en route, but in some places they have fixed halts or stations. Sometimes each service is allocated a number, which may be indicated on the vehicle. Generally, a flat fare applies for each route, but sometimes it's possible to pay a partial fare.

Shared taxis without routes are supreme examples of market forces at work. If the price is right you'll quickly find a taxi willing to take you almost anywhere, but if you're prepared to wait a while, or to do your journey in stages, you can get around for almost nothing. Fares depend largely on time and distance, but can also vary slightly according to demand.

Beware of boarding an empty one, as the driver may assume you want to hire the vehicle for your exclusive use and charge you accordingly. It's advisable to watch what other passengers pay and to hand over your fare in front of them. Passengers are expected to know where they are getting off. 'Thank you' in the local language is the usual cue for the driver to stop. Make it clear to the driver or other passengers if you want to be told when you reach your destination.

Health

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Prevention is the key to staying healthy while travelling in the Middle East. Infectious diseases can and do occur in the Middle East, but these are usually associated with poor living conditions and poverty and can be avoided with a few precautions. The most common reason for travellers needing medical help is as a result of accidents – cars are not always well maintained and poorly lit roads are littered with potholes. Medical facilities can be excellent in large cities, but in remoter areas may be more basic.

BEFORE YOU GO

A little planning before departure, particularly for pre-existing illnesses, will save you a lot of trouble later. See your dentist before a long trip; carry a spare pair of contact lenses and glasses (and take your optical prescription); and carry a first-aid kit with you.

It's tempting to leave it all to the last minute – don't! Many vaccines don't ensure immunity for two weeks, so visit a doctor four to eight weeks before departure. Ask your doctor for an International Certificate of Vaccination (otherwise known as the yellow booklet), which will list all the vaccinations you've received. This is mandatory for

countries that require proof of yellow fever vaccination upon entry, but it's a good idea to carry it wherever you travel.

Travellers can register with the **International Association for Medical Advice to Travellers** (IMAT; www.iamat.org). Its website can help travellers to find a doctor with recognised training. Those heading off to very remote areas may like to do a first-aid course, (Red Cross and St John Ambulance can help) or attend a remote medicine first-aid course, such as those offered by the **Royal Geographical Society** (www.rgs.org).

Bring medications in their original, clearly labelled containers. A signed and dated letter from your physician describing your medical conditions and medications, including generic names, is also a good idea. If carrying syringes or needles, be sure to have a physician's letter documenting their medical necessity.

INSURANCE

Find out in advance if your insurance plan will make payments directly to providers or reimburse you later for overseas health expenditures (in many Middle Eastern countries doctors expect payment in cash). It's also worth ensuring that your travel insurance will cover repatriation home or to better medical facilities elsewhere. Your insurance company may be able to locate the nearest source of medical help, or you can ask at your hotel. In an emergency, contact your embassy or consulate. Your travel insurance will not usually cover you for anything other than emergency dental treatment. Not all insurance covers emergency aeromedical evacuation home or to a hospital in a major city, which may be the only way to get medical attention for a serious emergency.

RECOMMENDED VACCINATIONS

The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends that all travellers, regardless of the region they are travelling in, should be covered for diphtheria, tetanus, measles, mumps, rubella and polio, as well as hepatitis B. While making preparations to travel, take the opportunity to ensure that all of your routine vaccination cover is complete.

The consequences of these diseases can be severe and outbreaks do occur in the Middle East.

MEDICAL CHECKLIST

Following is a list of other items you should consider packing in your medical kit.

- antibiotics (if travelling off the beaten track)
- anti-diarrhoeal drugs (eg loperamide)
- acetaminophen/paracetamol (eg Tylenol) or aspirin
- anti-inflammatory drugs (eg ibuprofen)
- antihistamines (for hay fever and allergic reactions)
- antibacterial ointment (eg Bactroban) for cuts and abrasions
- steroid cream or cortisone (allergic rashes)
- bandages, gauze, gauze rolls
- adhesive or paper tape
- scissors, safety pins, tweezers
- thermometer
- pocket knife
- DEET-containing insect repellent for the skin
- permethrin-containing insect spray for clothing, tents and bed nets
- sun block
- oral-rehydration salts
- iodine tablets (for water purification)
- syringes and sterile needles (if travelling to remote areas)

INTERNET RESOURCES

There is a wealth of travel health advice on the Internet. For further information, the website of **Lonely Planet** (www.lonelyplanet.com) is a good place to start. The **WHO** (www.who.int/ith/) publishes a superb book, *International Travel and Health*, which is revised annually and is available online at no cost.

TRAVEL HEALTH WEBSITES

It's usually a good idea to consult your government's travel health website before departure, if one is available.

Australia (www.dfat.gov.au/travel/)

Canada (<http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/english/index.html>)

United Kingdom (www.doh.gov.uk/traveladvice/)

United States (www.cdc.gov/travel/)

Another website of general interest is **MD Travel Health** (www.mdtravelhealth.com), which provides complete travel health recommendations for every country, updated daily, also at no cost. The website of the **Centers for Disease Control & Prevention** (www.cdc.gov) is a very useful source of traveller health information.

FURTHER READING

Recommended references include *Traveler's Health* by Dr Richard Dawood (Oxford University Press), *International Travel Health Guide* by Stuart R Rose, MD (Travel Medicine Inc), and *The Travellers' Good Health Guide* by Ted Lankester (Sheldon Press), an especially useful health guide for volunteers and long-term expatriates working in the Middle East.

IN TRANSIT

DEEP VEIN THROMBOSIS (DVT)

Deep vein thrombosis occurs when blood clots form in the legs during plane flights, chiefly due to prolonged immobility. The longer the flight, the greater the risk. Most blood clots are reabsorbed uneventfully, but some may break off and travel through the blood vessels to the lungs, where they may cause life-threatening complications.

The chief symptom of DVT is swelling or pain of the foot, ankle or calf, usually but not always on just one side. When a blood clot travels to the lungs, it may cause chest pain and difficulty breathing. Travellers with any of these symptoms should immediately seek medical attention.

To prevent the development of DVT on long flights you should walk about the cabin, perform isometric compressions of the leg muscles (ie contract the leg muscles while sitting), drink plenty of fluids, and avoid alcohol and tobacco.

JET LAG & MOTION SICKNESS

Jet lag is common when crossing more than five time zones, and results in insomnia, fatigue, malaise or nausea. To avoid jet lag try drinking plenty of fluids (nonalcoholic) and eating light meals. Upon arrival, seek exposure to natural sunlight and readjust your schedule (for meals, sleep etc) as soon as possible.

Antihistamines such as dimenhydrinate (Dramamine) and meclizine (Antivert, Bonine) are usually the first choice for treating motion sickness. Their main side-effect is drowsiness. A herbal alternative is ginger, which works like a charm for some people.

IN THE MIDDLE EAST

AVAILABILITY & COST OF HEALTH CARE

The health care systems in the Middle East are varied. Medical care can be excellent in Israel, with well-trained doctors and nurses, but can be patchier elsewhere. Reciprocal arrangements with countries rarely exist and you should be prepared to pay for all medical and dental treatment.

Medical care is not always readily available outside major cities. Medicine, and even sterile dressings or intravenous fluids, may need to be bought from a local pharmacy. Nursing care may be limited or rudimentary as this is something families and friends are expected to provide. The travel assistance provided by your insurance may be able to locate the nearest source of medical help, otherwise ask at your hotel. In an emergency, contact your embassy or consulate. Also see Medical Services in the Information section of the capital city in each country chapter.

Standards of dental care are variable and there is an increased risk of hepatitis B and HIV transmission via poorly sterilised equipment. And keep in mind that your travel insurance will not usually cover you for anything other than emergency dental treatment.

For minor illnesses such as diarrhoea, pharmacists can often provide valuable advice and sell over-the-counter medication. They can also advise when more specialised help is needed.

INFECTIOUS DISEASES

Diphtheria

Diphtheria is spread through close respiratory contact. It causes a high temperature and severe sore throat. Sometimes a membrane forms across the throat requiring a tracheostomy to prevent suffocation. Vaccination is recommended for those likely to be in close contact with the local population in infected areas. The vaccine is given as an

injection alone, or with tetanus, and lasts 10 years.

Hepatitis A

Hepatitis A is spread through contaminated food (particularly shellfish) and water. It causes jaundice, and although it is rarely fatal, can cause prolonged lethargy and delayed recovery. Symptoms include dark urine, a yellow colour to the whites of the eyes, fever and abdominal pain. Hepatitis A vaccine (Avaxim, VAQTA, Havrix) is given as an injection: a single dose will give protection for up to a year, while a booster 12 months later will provide a subsequent 10 years of protection. Hepatitis A and typhoid vaccines can also be given as a single dose vaccine (hepatyrix or viatim).

Hepatitis B

Infected blood, contaminated needles and sexual intercourse can all transmit hepatitis B. It can cause jaundice, and affects the liver, occasionally causing liver failure. All travellers should make this a routine vaccination. (Many countries now give hepatitis B vaccination as part of routine childhood vaccination.) The vaccine is given singly, or at the same time as the hepatitis A vaccine (hepatyrix). A course will give protection for at least five years, and can be given over four weeks or six months.

HIV

Countries in the Middle East covered by this book that require a negative HIV test as a visa requirement for some categories of visas include Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Libya.

Leishmaniasis

Spread through the bite of an infected sand fly, leishmaniasis can cause a slowly growing skin lump or ulcer. It may develop into a serious life-threatening fever usually accompanied by anaemia and weight loss. Infected dogs are also carriers of the infection. Sand fly bites should be avoided whenever possible. Leishmaniasis is present in Iran, Iraq, Israel and the Palestinian Territories, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and Turkey.

Leptospirosis

Leptospirosis is spread through the excreta of infected rodents, especially rats. It can

cause hepatitis and renal failure that may be fatal. It is unusual for travellers to be affected unless living in poor sanitary conditions; the greatest risk is in Turkey. It causes a fever and jaundice.

Malaria

The prevalence of malaria varies throughout the Middle East. Many areas are considered to be malaria free, while others have seasonal risks. The risk of malaria is minimal in most cities; however, check with your doctor if you are considering travelling to any rural areas. It is important to take anti-malarial tablets if the risk is significant. For up-to-date information about the risk of contracting malaria in a specific country, contact your local travel health clinic.

Anyone who has travelled in a country where malaria is present should be aware of the symptoms of malaria. It is possible to contract malaria from a single bite from an infected mosquito. Malaria almost always starts with marked shivering, fever and sweating. Muscle pains, headache and vomiting are common. Symptoms may occur anywhere from a few days to three weeks after the infected mosquito bite. The illness can start while you are taking preventative tablets if they are not fully effective, and may also occur after you have finished taking your tablets.

Polio

Generally spread through contaminated food and water, polio is present, though rare, throughout the Middle East. It is one of the vaccines given in childhood and should be boosted every 10 years, either orally (a drop on the tongue), or as an injection. Polio may be carried asymptotically, although it can cause a transient fever and, in rare cases, potentially permanent muscle weakness or paralysis.

Rabies

Spread through bites or licks on broken skin from an infected animal, rabies (present in all countries of the Middle East) is fatal. Animal handlers should be vaccinated, as should those travelling to remote areas where a reliable source of postbite vaccine is not available within 24 hours. Three injections are needed over a month. If you have not been vaccinated you will need a

course of five injections starting within 24 hours or as soon as possible after the injury. Vaccination does not provide you with immunity, it merely buys you more time to seek appropriate medical help.

Rift Valley Fever

This haemorrhagic fever, which is found in Egypt, is spread through blood or blood products, including those from infected animals. It causes a 'flu-like' illness with fever, joint pains and occasionally more serious complications. Complete recovery is possible.

Schistosomiasis

Otherwise known as bilharzia, this is spread through the freshwater snail. It causes infection of the bowel and bladder, often with bleeding. It is caused by a fluke and is contracted through the skin from water contaminated with human urine or faeces. Paddling or swimming in suspect freshwater lakes or slow running rivers should be avoided. There may be no symptoms. Possible symptoms include a transient fever and rash, and advanced cases of bilharzia may cause blood in the stool or in the urine. A blood test can detect antibodies if you have been exposed and treatment is then possible in specialist travel or infectious disease clinics. Be especially careful in Egypt, Iraq and Syria.

Tuberculosis (TB)

Tuberculosis is spread through close respiratory contact and occasionally through infected milk or milk products. BCG vaccine is recommended for those likely to be mixing closely with the local population. It is more important for those visiting family or planning on a long stay, and those employed as teachers and health-care workers. TB can be asymptomatic, although symptoms can include coughing, weight loss or fever months or even years after exposure. An X-ray is the best way to confirm if you have TB. BCG gives a moderate degree of protection against TB. It causes a small permanent scar at the site of injection, and is usually only given in specialised chest clinics. As it's a live vaccine it should not be given to pregnant women or immunocompromised individuals. The BCG vaccine is not available in all countries.

Typhoid

Typhoid is spread through food or water that has been contaminated by infected human faeces. The first symptom is usually fever or a pink rash on the abdomen. Septicaemia (blood poisoning) may also occur. Typhoid vaccine (typhim Vi, typherix) will give protection for three years. In some countries, the oral vaccine Vivotif is also available.

Yellow Fever

Yellow fever vaccination is not required for any areas of the Middle East. However, the mosquito that spreads yellow fever has been known to be present in some parts of the Middle East. It is important to consult your local travel health clinic as part of your predeparture plans for the latest details. For this reason, any travellers from a yellow fever endemic area will need to show proof of vaccination against yellow fever before entry. This normally means if arriving directly from an infected country or if the traveller has been in an infected country during the last 10 days. We would recommend, however, that travellers carry a certificate if they have been in an infected country during the previous month to avoid any possible difficulties with immigration. There is always the possibility that a traveller without an up-to-date certificate will be vaccinated and detained in isolation at the port of arrival for up to 10 days, or even repatriated. The yellow fever vaccination must be given at a designated clinic, and is valid for 10 years. It is a live vaccine and must not be given to immunocompromised or pregnant travellers.

TRAVELLER'S DIARRHOEA

To prevent diarrhoea, avoid tap water unless it has been boiled, filtered or chemically disinfected (with iodine tablets). Eat only fresh fruits or vegetables if cooked or if you have peeled them yourself and avoid dairy products that may contain unpasteurised milk. Buffet meals are risky, as food should be piping hot; meals freshly cooked in front of you in a busy restaurant are more likely to be safe.

If you develop diarrhoea, be sure to drink plenty of fluids, preferably an oral rehydration solution containing salt and sugar. A few loose stools don't require treatment

but, if you start having more than four or five stools a day, you should start taking an antibiotic (usually a quinolone drug) and an anti-diarrhoeal agent (such as loperamide). If diarrhoea is bloody, persists for more than 72 hours, is accompanied by fever, shaking chills or severe abdominal pain you should seek medical attention.

ENVIRONMENTAL HAZARDS

Heat Illness

Heat exhaustion occurs after heavy sweating and excessive fluid loss with inadequate replacement of fluids and salt. It is particularly common in hot climates when taking unaccustomed exercise before full acclimatisation. Symptoms include headache, dizziness and tiredness. Dehydration is already happening by the time you feel thirsty – aim to drink sufficient water so that you produce pale, diluted urine. The treatment of heat exhaustion consists of fluid replacement with water or fruit juice or both, and cooling by cold water and fans. The treatment of the salt-loss component consists of salty fluids as in soup or broth, and adding a little more table salt to foods than usual.

Heat stroke is much more serious. This occurs when the heat-regulating mechanism in the body breaks down. An excessive rise in body temperature leads to sweating ceasing, irrational and hyperactive behaviour, and eventually loss of consciousness and death. Rapid cooling by spraying the body with water and fanning is an ideal treatment. Emergency fluid and electrolyte replacement by intravenous drip is usually also required.

Insect Bites & Stings

Mosquitoes may not carry malaria but can cause irritation and infected bites. Using DEET-based insect repellents will prevent bites. Mosquitoes also spread dengue fever.

Bees and wasps only cause real problems to those with a severe allergy (anaphylaxis). If you have a severe allergy to bee or wasp stings you should carry an adrenaline injection or similar.

Sand flies are located around the Mediterranean beaches. They usually only cause a nasty itchy bite but can carry a rare skin disorder called cutaneous leishmaniasis. Bites may be prevented by using DEET-based repellents.

Scorpions are frequently found in arid or dry climates. They can cause a painful bite, which is rarely life threatening.

Bed bugs are often found in hostels and cheap hotels. They lead to very itchy lumpy bites. Spraying the mattress with an appropriate insect killer will do a good job of getting rid of them.

Scabies are also frequently found in cheap accommodation. These tiny mites live in the skin, particularly between the fingers. They cause an intensely itchy rash. Scabies is easily treated with lotion available from pharmacies; people who you come into contact with also need treating to avoid spreading scabies between asymptomatic carriers.

Snake Bites

Do not walk barefoot or stick your hand into holes or cracks. Half of those bitten by venomous snakes are not actually injected with poison (envenomed). If bitten by a snake, do not panic. Immobilise the bitten limb with a splint (eg a stick) and apply a bandage over the site, firm pressure, similar to a bandage over a sprain. Do not apply a tourniquet, or cut or suck the bite. Get the victim to medical help as soon as possible so that antivenin can be given if necessary.

Water

Tap water is not safe to drink in the Middle East. Stick to bottled water, boil water for 10 minutes, or use water-purification tablets or a filter. Do not drink water from rivers or lakes; this may contain bacteria or viruses that can cause diarrhoea or vomiting.

TRAVELLING WITH CHILDREN

All travellers with children should know how to treat minor ailments and when to seek medical treatment. Make sure the children are up to date with routine vaccinations, and discuss possible travel vaccines well before departure as some vaccines are not suitable for children aged under one year.

In hot, moist climates any wound or break in the skin may lead to infection. The area should be cleaned and then kept dry and clean. Remember to avoid contaminated food and water. If your child is vomiting or experiencing diarrhoea, lost fluid and salts must be replaced. It may be helpful to take rehydration powders for

reconstituting with boiled water. Ask your doctor about this.

Children should be encouraged to avoid dogs or other mammals because of the risk of rabies and other diseases. Any bite, scratch or lick from a warm blooded, furry animal should immediately be thoroughly cleaned. If there is any possibility that the animal is infected with rabies, immediate medical assistance should be sought.

WOMEN'S HEALTH

Emotional stress, exhaustion and travelling through different time zones can all contribute to an upset in the menstrual pattern. If using oral contraceptives, remember some antibiotics, diarrhoea and vomiting can stop the pill from working and lead to the risk of pregnancy – remember to take condoms with you just in case. Condoms should be kept in a cool, dry place or they may crack and perish.

Emergency contraception is most effective if taken within 24 hours after unprotected sex. The **International Planned Parenthood Federation** (www.ippf.org) can advise about the availability of contraception in different countries. Tampons and sanitary towels are not always available outside of major cities in the Middle East.

Travelling during pregnancy is usually possible but there are important things to consider. Have a medical check-up before embarking on your trip. The most risky times for travel are during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy, when miscarriage is most likely, and after 30 weeks, when complications such as high blood pressure and premature delivery can occur. Most airlines will not accept a traveller after 28 to 32 weeks of pregnancy, and long-haul flights in the later stages can be very uncomfortable. Antenatal facilities vary greatly between countries in the Middle East and you should think carefully before travelling to a country with poor medical facilities or where there are major cultural and language differences from home. Taking written records of the pregnancy, including details of your blood group, are likely to be helpful if you need medical attention while away. Ensure your insurance policy covers pregnancy, delivery and postnatal care, but remember insurance policies are only as good as the facilities available.

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