



WATER INVASION

While traveling in Japan, TBE booked four of us into a Japanese ryokan in the foothills of Mount Fuji, a traditional hotel that Japanese citizens escape to for a weekend of relaxation and reflection. We were the only non-natives in attendance, and were greeted with gracious hospitality and escorted to our room.

Our room came complete with an attendant who immediately served tea at a typical low table where we sat on cushions as she bustled about preparing the tea for us. When the table was set, she disappeared on silent feet and only magically reappeared as we exited the room or stepped off the elevator. After tea, we dressed in the kimono's the hotel hung in every closet for the comfort of their guests and proceeded out the door (greeted by attendant) to go to the fifth floor to the traditional Japanese baths. The ryokan pumped water from natural hot springs into clear, natural pools inside and grotto-like outdoor bathing spots. As we entered the women's baths, we saw a lovely steaming pool where people were soaking naked and speaking to one another softly, if at all. Surrounding the pool, on two sides, were small stalls, equipped with tiny, three-legged stools, a hand-held shower mounted two feet from the floor, a scrub brush, a bar of soap and a small bucket. We were directed to remove our clothing and scrub ourselves clean.

Now, at this juncture in the tale, I must make two points that are important to the story. First, Japanese women are tiny, waiflike, thin, small-breasted, small-bottomed people with small features that exude a sense of respectful privacy and gentle politeness. Second, the owners of Japanese ryokans are obsessed with cleanliness because the natural hot spring water is not chemically treated. So, you can imagine our dilemma as we made an attempt to balance our ample bottoms on the tiny stools and contort ourselves in various awkward positions to lather ourselves up in difficult to reach regions, all the while not appearing to focus too much attention on those spots, lest our fellow bathers think we were enjoying the lathering up part of the ritual too much. We scrubbed ourselves and dumped a bucket of water over to rinse, but were given the nod to scrub again until nearly bleeding before being allowed to enter the steaming pool. As we rose from the stool (or, it could be said, as we removed the tiny stool from our behinds), our girth and height made quite an impression upon those gathered in the pool. Whereas the natives silently "slip" gracefully into the pool, we made every attempt to enter the waters unnoticed but our Amazonian proportions made that nearly impossible. Plopping of bottoms and the slapping of breasts on the surface caused ripples that were easily traced back to us. Some women subtly moved away from us and avoided eye contact. Once covered with the healing waters, we blended in as best we could until it was time to leave. As we exited the pool, a young mother with her 4-year old son were making their way to the dressing room. Clinging tightly to his mother's hand, this young child's eyes began to widen as he approached us. One can only wonder what his thoughts were. Who were these creatures emerging from the waters like Godzilla emerging from the Hudson River? Had we come from a far away planet where we carried a soft cushion for sitting with us all the time? Could we have trekked out of the mists of Mount Fuji from a land of giants with oversized breasts and feet? Clearly the child had never seen a naked woman outside of and unlike his mother. As he walked carefully past us, he looked up at his mother, inquisitively, his lips forming a question, begging an explanation with his eyes. His mother, sensing that a faux pas was about to take place responded with the universal "embarrassing moment thwarting maneuver" – she looked down at him with a dark look while simultaneously applying a firm squeeze to his hand, which informed him, "don't you dare say anything!" As they exited the door with one incredulous look back at us, his eyes were like saucers, but with a story to tell on the playground for years to come.



HALLOWEEN IN THE HOLY LAND

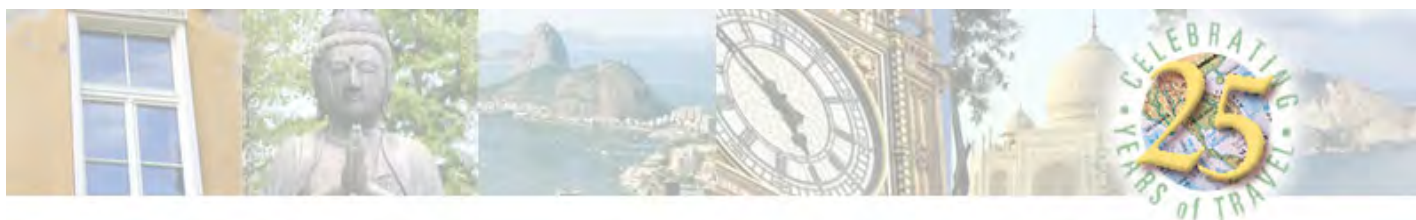
Last fall while traveling with TBE in Petra, Jordan, we stayed at the Taybet Zaman Resort. The Taybet Zaman had originally been a 19th-century stone village. Perched on a hillside, this walled community provided a relaxing atmosphere for our group. As the sun was setting and the Muslim call to prayer blasted over a neighboring loudspeaker, I was missing home. In just two weeks I had crawled down in pyramids, haggled with shopkeepers, sailed on the Nile, and galloped on camels but I was still homesick.

I needed comfort. I needed familiarity. It was October 31st, so I decided to introduce some Western culture to the Middle East by going trick-or-treating that evening. My unsuspecting travel family was winding down for the evening. We had spent a hot, dusty day roaming through the rock-walled fortress of Petra. With darkness overtaking our village and my Halloween costume in place, I set out to score some treats. I was dressed as ... (wait for it) ... an American tourist. I picked up a pink shopping bag and began knocking on the doors of my fellow tourists.

Here's what I got:

- Breath mints – from my roommate, the accountant; the breath mints we shaped like little dollar bills. Hmm...handing off a freebie?
- Ear plugs – from Deb; she searched feverishly to give them to me. I'm a snorer. Someone else should've gotten the ear plugs.
- A fire ball – from Leisa Ann; she was delighted this would be the most "Halloween" type of treat.
- A bag of Sunkist Fruit Gems – from Marge; she threw the entire bag at me, yelled something about hating beggars, and then slammed the door.
- Quaker granola snacks – from Gayle; I genuinely think Gayle wanted to join me in my trick-or-treat activities until she found out that her mother threw a bag of candy at me.
- Cigars and matches – from Jen; she was generous to give me two cigars but let me know I was to share them with her.
- A water bottle with half a cup of vodka in it – from Syd and Dick; they wanted me to drink it there on the spot. I marveled at their deception and realized it is people like them who are the reason TSA stops me for liquids in the airport
- A half bottle of vodka – from Julia; she handed it off with a "sure, we'll get more!" attitude.
- A Ziploc bag with Vicodin and Valium – from Judy; like Julia, she handed it off with the "sure, we'll get more!" attitude until I laughed and began to stroll back to my room. Judy asked, "Seriously? You're taking that? Seriously?"
- A Traditional and handmade Pistachio nougat – from Teresa; spreading all of her candy on the table she insisted on finding "just the right piece of candy for me". It was delicately wrapped and delightfully tasting.

Like a little kid, I poured my treasures out on my bed and marveled at the bounty. Where to start? My Middle Eastern Halloween with Vodka, Valium, and Vicodin was like no other.



WADI RUM: AN EVENING UNDER THE STARS WITH SHADOW PUPPETS AND BEDOUIN MEN

When I told my friends, family, and coworkers about my impending journey to the Middle East with TBE this past fall, their reactions were easily parsed into two distinct camps – the “how exciting wish I could go” and the “oh my god why would you want to go.” For the “wish I could go,” the mere mention of the Middle East evoked images of narrow winding footpaths through noisy and colorful bazaars, soulful calls to prayer filling the early morning air, exoticism at every turn – in the food, the music, the clothing, the rhythm of the Arabic language. For them – and for me – the Middle East is mystery, magic, and wonder. But for the “why would you want to go,” the Middle East means Muslims and mayhem – a provincial view of a richly diverse part of the world informed only by our strained relations with Iran and our continuing war in Iraq.

But the Middle East is so much more than bombs and Baghdad. It is Armenia and Azerbaijan. It is Turkmenistan and Yemen. And, for me this past fall, it was Egypt and Jordan – the pyramids, the Nile, the Dead Sea, and Wadi Rum, an unearthly desertscape of sandstone and granite in southwest Jordan. Rock climbers know Wadi Rum for its amazing natural formations. I knew Wadi Rum as the home base of T.E. Lawrence’s adventures during the Arab Revolt of 1917-18. Thanks go to the 1962 cinematic classic, *Lawrence of Arabia*, not to my history teachers. The *Red Planet*, a science fiction movie featuring Val Kilmer and Benjamin Bratt, also was filmed in the desert. Wadi Rum starred as the planet Mars, which should give you some indication of the otherworldliness of this remote landscape, populated primarily by the Bedouins, tribes of desert-dwelling nomads.

My traveling companions and I spent the night in Wadi Rum, in a Bedouin camp of goat hair tents. After a traditional Zarb dinner, we sat under the stars around a crackling fire remembering past adventures and planning future ones. I’m not sure what prompted it, but a fellow traveler and I found ourselves making shadow puppets – first alligators, then dogs, and finally a pair of rabbits that waged a comical battle against the stone wall that arched over our tents. We all laughed – but over our laughter – there was applause. The Bedouin men who pitched our tents and cooked our meal had gathered at the edge of the fire. They clapped, clearly captivated and delighted by our childish display. “We have never seen this,” they said. And they clapped and clapped.

People travel for a lot of reasons. I travel to remind myself that the world is bigger than my town, that my neighbors aren’t simply the people who share my property line. Our world holds boundless adventures and infinite opportunities to enrich each other’s lives – even something as simple as an impromptu shadow puppet show under a starry Jordanian sky.