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Make tracks for an island ramble

DIE-hard ramblers and leisure walkers alike can be part of the Isle of Wight Steam Railway's 40th birthday celebrations by joining a commemorative walk from Shanklin Railway Station to Ventnor on April 21. One of a series of events to mark the railway's anniversary year, the walk along the former railway line is in association with the Isle of Wight Ramblers and commemorates the closure of the line 45 years ago. Walkers will be joined by a knowledgeable guide. Wightlink (0871 376 1000 www.wightlink.co.uk) is offering day-return ferry crossings from Portsmouth or Lymington for a car and up to four people from £35.50. Day-return foot passenger tickets costs from £12.30 per person. A four-night Wightlink self-catering break at Niton Barns costs from £121 per person (based on four sharing), including return car ferry crossings from Portsmouth or Lymington on April 18.

Low-season offers for Spanish resort

MALLORCA Farmhouses is offering savings of up to 20 per cent on selected properties this spring and autumn. Mallorca has plenty to offer holidaymakers during the low-season, from hikes through stunning mountains to wine tastings at famous vineyards. Autumn is the ideal time to visit some of Mallorca's vineyards as the orchards are in full harvest. The successful, family-owned Bodegas Macià Batle offers visitors a tour to view the entire wine-making process as well as wine-tasting of its award-winning vintages. Self-catering accommodation is now available with Mallorca Farmhouses from £71 per person, per week. For further information call 0845 800 8080 or visit www.mallorca.co.uk.

Honours for hotels

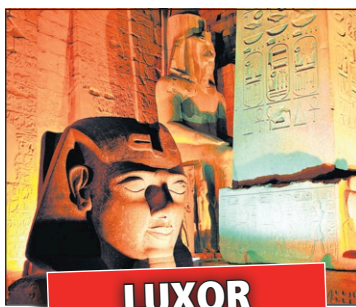
ETTINGTON Park Hotel in Stratford-Upon-Avon has been named Hand Picked Hotels' 'Hotel of the Year 2010'. Hand Picked Hotels is a collection of 17 country house hotels across the UK. The 'Most Improved Hotel of the Year', was awarded to the four-star New Hall Hotel & Spa in Sutton Coldfield.



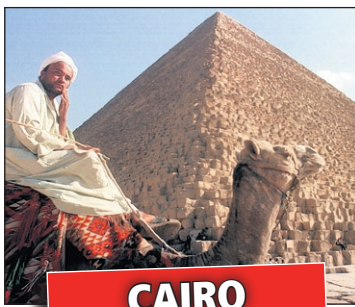
JERUSALEM



DEAD SEA

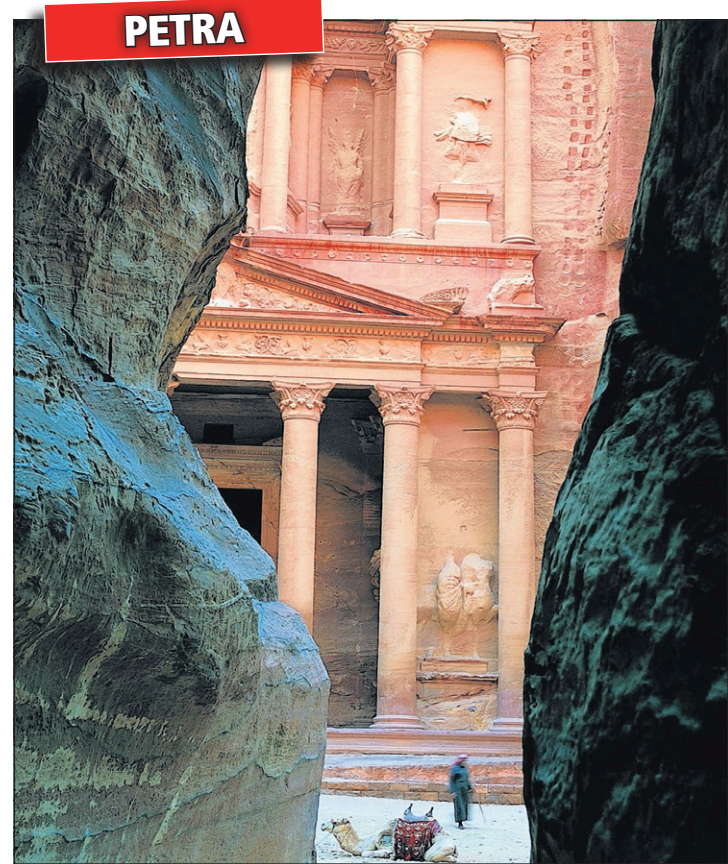


LUXOR



CAIRO

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PETRA

Great Escape

By Adrian Caffery

It's the annual dilemma that has the potential to put the skids under the most stable of marriages – where to go on holiday.

He wants to immerse himself in history; she wants to immerse herself in a good book while lazing on the beach. He wants some high-octane thrills to get the adrenalin pumping; she wants a nightclub where the Bacardi & Cokes are freely flowing.

But before warring couples scan the Yellow Pages in search of a good divorce lawyer, they should leaf through Thomson's Egypt brochure, for a solution lies therein.

Sharm El Sheikh, situated at the southern tip of the Sinai Peninsula, is the year-round destination with something for everyone. Well, except snow for keen skiers as the average temperatures range from 65F in January to 95F in July.

For her, the holiday resort has an abundance of reasonably-priced quality hotels boasting private sandy beaches with more than enough sun loungers and thatched parasols to go round.

When night falls she can join an organised pub crawl in vibrant Naama Bay, where she'll also find bazaars, street cafes and clubs, including the world-class Pacha.

He, meanwhile, can get his kicks scuba diving in the Red Sea's underwater paradise or roaring across rippling desert sands on a quad bike.

But the real pulling power of Sharm is that there's probably not another place on Earth with so many historically important sites within easy reach.

St Catherine's Monastery, where God appeared to Moses in the form of a burning bush, and Mount Sinai, where Moses received the Ten Commandments, is only a two-and-a-half hour coach ride away.

It's possible to fly to Cairo, explore the pyramids and museum and take a trip down the River Nile and still be back at your hotel by bedtime. Or go by coach and stay overnight in the capital.

Day trips are also available to the temples and royal tombs in Luxor, the holy city of Jerusalem in Israel and the rock-cut city of Petra in Jordan.

When my wife and I visited Sharm last year we stayed at the Renaissance Golden View Beach Resort, part of Thomson's Platinum Collection of 4-star and 5-star hotels.

All Platinum hotels are rated "good" or "excellent" by at least 90 per cent of customers. Other 'Platinum Privileges' include extra baggage allowance and a first or second drop from the airport.

After a 30-minute transfer, we passed through the Renaissance's palatial lobby to the first of the hotel's four outdoor pools (although only one is heated).

Its 384 rooms, many with sea views, are in low-rise terraces

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Beach-side: The Renaissance Golden View Beach Resort.

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RED SEA

Spoilt for choice: Sharm El Sheikh is famous for its coral reefs but there's lots to see on dry land, too.

which tumble down to the man-made beach. The gardens are fragrant and lush – a miracle considering the climate.

The Renaissance has four restaurants – Mexican, Italian, international and buffet – and light entertainment is sometimes served up with the meals.

There's tennis, beach volleyball, a diving centre, a sauna and steam room and on-site shop, although we found a cheaper mini-supermarket just outside the gates.

The Renaissance is away from Naama Bay's hubbub of excitement but a shuttle bus service means the nightlife is only a ten-minute ride away.

For me, the beauty of the hotel was that it had its own coral reef offering up some of the best snorkelling in Sharm.

I wasted no time in buying the laminated Fish Of The Red Sea card from the hotel shop before excitedly skipping across the floating pontoon to the reef.

Like a kid on a school outing to a museum or zoo, I'd place a tick next to any fish on the card that vaguely resembled ones I'd captured on my underwater camera.

"Jayne, Jayne," I'd call to my better half, "I think I've got a puffer fish." And with the patience of a saint she'd look up from her book for the umpteenth time and faint enthusiasm.

Then I'd dive back into the sea and she'd dive back between the covers of her novel and everyone

was happy – and that's the beauty of Sharm El Sheikh.

Getting There

Thomson flies to Sharm El Sheikh from Birmingham. Seven nights B&B at the Renaissance Golden View Beach Resort starts at £525pp per week (early May). Going all-inclusive with Thomson at other hotels starts from £515pp per week. Visit thomson.co.uk.

EXCURSIONS FROM SHARM

■ Dip your toe into scuba diving with an introductory briefing in shallow waters before exploring Sharm's coral reefs – half day, £49.

■ Grab your snorkelling mask for a Red Sea cruise, the boat dropping anchor at three rainbow-coloured reefs – full day, £39.

■ Want to watch the underwater world but don't fancy wriggling into a wetsuit? Then a glass-hulled boat trip is for you – half day, £35.

■ Straddle a quad bike and snake your way around golden dunes on a desert safari with lunch in a Bedouin tent – half day, £39.

■ Float in the Dead Sea then follow in the footsteps of Christ in Jerusalem, checking out the Wailing Wall as you go – full day, £145.

■ Visit the 6th Century St Catherine's Monastery, built on the spot where Moses is said to have received the Ten Commandments – full day, £39.

■ Sail to Jordan to explore jaw-dropping Petra, the ancient city which lay hidden in the rose canyons for 1,000 years – full day, £200.

■ Fly to Luxor (ancient Thebes) and marvel at its temples then cross the Nile and walk through the Valley Of The Kings – full day, £179.

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