

Stefanie & Bob's Travel Tips

By Stefanie Elkins (updated June 2021)



Money & Expenses

In the Middle East and much of the Mediterranean world, day-to-day spending tends to cash-based. Therefore, when we travel we rely mostly on cash, although many of the larger tourist shops accept credit cards which is nice for large purchases. For us, it all comes down to maximizing ease and minimizing fees. We pay for as much as possible with cash, using a bank that charges no or low fees for international ATM transactions, and withdrawing large amounts at each transaction. Depending on the country, upon arrival, one of us usually heads for an ATM at the airport and then we keep the cash safe in our money belt. Another option is to order international currency online. While this is a good idea for countries like Jordan, this is not an issue in Egypt as everyone deals in US dollars and it is easier to get EP at the ATM's in the hotels. If you want international currency ahead of time, go to <https://www.travelex.com> and your money will be delivered to you before you leave!

ATM's are readily available in or near hotels in so you will be able to change money as needed if you so desire. Keep in mind that street vendors don't take credit cards and shops in Jordan prefer that you use the Jordanian Dinar. If you bring US currency with you, there is usually a Western Union nearby where you can change currencies. Even if you plan on only using cash however, we advise bringing along at least one credit card for emergencies or large purchases.

The official currency of Egypt is the Egyptian Pound (EP) and for Jordan it is the Jordanian Dinar (JD). Prices can be listed by local prices or by US Dollars. The American dollar is typically stronger which means that Egypt and Jordan can be quite affordable. However, most people from the Middle East see Americans as dollars with legs so tourist sites are likely to be overpriced.

Have a wad of one dollar bills on hand, or local change – this is only really applicable in Egypt where small tips are expected for everything including taking pictures of locals (they will expect to get paid!), having a guard “fan” you while we visit tombs, or visiting certain toilets at tourist sites.

Please call your credit card company before leaving to ensure your card can be used overseas and to notify the company about your travel destinations and dates of travel. If you do not do this and try to use your card, it is likely that an emergency hold will be put on your card (as it will be considered suspicious) and you will not be able to use it until you are able to contact your credit card company by phone asking them to release the card.



Tipping

In Arabic, tipping is called *baksheesh*. Because salaries and wages in the Middle East are much lower than Western countries, *baksheesh* is an essential means of supplementing income. This is a common practice in Egypt and Jordan and is expected from locals as well as foreigners. However, if you are not used to continual tipping, demands for *baksheesh* for doing anything from opening doors to pointing out the obvious can become taxing. You will find this mostly in Egypt where vendors are desperate for cash.

Demanding tips for everything (like posing for pictures which they will gladly do) is considered acceptable in Egypt. Use your discretion and don't be intimidated into paying *baksheesh* when you don't think the service is warranted. Just be aware that if you ask an Egyptian for directions or to take a picture of you and yours, you will be asked for *baksheesh* and you should give it. However, NEVER tip more than a few dollars at most – we will guide you on this. Tipping for hotels and arranged tours will be taken care of and are included in your tour, but local tipping could take you off guard if you're not prepared for it. One suggestion is to carry several US one dollar bills with you and also to keep it separate from bigger bills as flashing your cash could lead to demands for greater *baksheesh*.

Remember that for the most part, these are impoverished people who have not had the benefit of education or being assured of basic human needs that we take for granted. Often their only source of income is your tourist dollars. Regardless of how you may think of yourself financially here in America – we are considered extremely rich compared to most people in the world.

Phones & International Calls

We recommend bringing your smartphone. Bob and I use local phones when we travel but if your phone is unlocked you can purchase a SIM card ahead of time or, when in Jordan, purchase a data card in Madaba at the local phone shop we use. They cost about 10 JD and will allow you to surf the net, etc. while we travel in Jordan. Whatever you do, do not switch your phone to roam while we are overseas as you will be greeted with a potentially ridiculous bill when you get home! The best options for staying connected:

- **Bring your phone and sign up for an international/global plan.** This is the easiest option. Contact your phone provider for a basic international calling and/or data plan that is customizable to fit your needs. This way you get to travel with all your contacts and your US phone number making it easier to connect with family and business back home.
- **Bring your phone and email or net surf when we have free WiFi.** For the more budget conscious, this plan allows you to not pay anything extra (as all our hotels will have free WiFi). We will be bringing a "hotspot" WiFi so you can get online while we travel in the busses, but keep in mind that it will be slow and cannot handle more than a dozen users at a time.
- **Buy a local SIM card for your phone.** This option is ideal for people who plan to make a lot of calls while traveling. You will get a local number but understand that you will have to buy two SIM cards – one for Jordan, and then a new one for Egypt. If this is the case – see if you can do this before you leave home. Your phone will also need to be unlocked in order to do this. Check out this website for iPhone users for more handy information, <http://thebudgetmindedtraveler.com/iphone-abroad/>



Electricity, WiFi, & Other

The voltage in Jordan and Egypt is 220V AC. Many electronic devices today are dual voltage (Apple products are dual voltage, but check yours to be sure!). If your electronics are not dual voltage, you will need a power converter that will switch the voltage of your device when plugged in. While many places in Egypt utilize the American outlet, plan on bringing a plug adapter that consists of two round prongs. See my packing list for more advice on this. WiFi will be available at all the hotels we stay at and is free. However, please be aware that the internet connection can be sketchy at best even in the finest of hotels.



The two prong universal plug adapter will work in Jordan. Egypt also uses this as well as regular US style plug holes.



You can buy power converter kits at Walmart, Target, or Office Depot. They usually come with different plug adapters.

Weights & Measures: Egypt and Jordan (like every other country on the planet other than the US) uses the metric system.

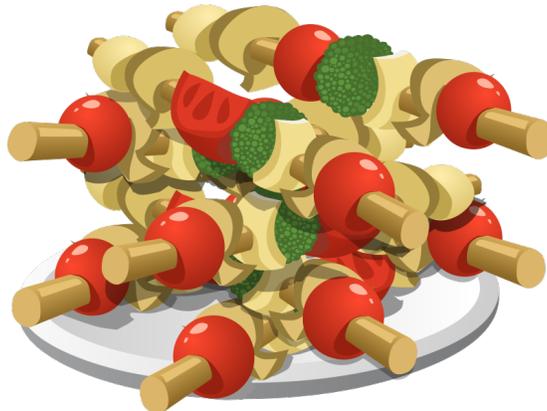
Time: Jordan time is 7 hours ahead of EST and Egypt is 6 hours ahead.

Language: The official language of Egypt and Jordan is Arabic, although local dialects can vary widely. Everyone speaks at least some English and you will be surprised at how many of the locals are fluent English speakers!

Vegetarianism

Being a vegetarian in the Middle East isn't impossible, but it can be dull. Staples of *falafel*, *fuul*, *ta'amiyya*, *hummus*, *tahini*, *baba ghanoush* and some *mezze* are meat free. Main dishes are almost always meat based however, and even dishes labeled vegetarian are sometimes cooked in a meat base. Vegetarianism is a concept little understood in the Middle East in general as the ability to eat and serve meat is associated with wealth and prosperity. There is a phrase you can use in Arabic. If you are male say, *ana nabaatee*. If female, say *ana nabateeyya*. (I'm vegetarian). You just might want to bring some Bean-o or Gas-X as Middle Eastern dishes containing fava or garbanzo beans (which are in most dishes!) can cause serious bloating and gas!

We always request vegetarian meals at the hotels we stay at. There will be meat dishes as well, but so far we have had wonderful vegetarian and even vegan offerings! If you have stricter dietary needs or habits however, you might want to bring some meal replacement bars or shake mixes to supplement your meals.



Laundry

There are two options for dealing with clean clothes while on our trip: Bring enough clothes so you don't need to do laundry, or splurge on full-service laundry offered by the hotels and cruise ship we will stay in. As we travel a lot, we are used to doing a lot of our laundry in hotel sinks! This is only practical for underthings and/or quick dry items. If you wish to do this, pack yourself a little laundry kit containing a stretchable travel clothesline (makes clothespins unnecessary), a sink stopper, and packets of liquid Tide laundry soap or by bringing concentrated liquid detergent in a squeeze bottle wrapped in a sealable baggie (do NOT bring powder detergent!). While many hotels prefer that you not do laundry in your room, many provide a pull out laundry line in the shower/tub. As long as you wash carefully and are respectful of the room by hanging your things in a discrete place (bathroom or balcony), feel free to wash away!

For larger, heavier, or really stinky items we hire out. On a two week trip we typically send out our laundry twice. Yes, it is expensive, but it helps us to not take so many clothes and the convenience of having your laundry washed and dried on the same day cannot be beat when you are on tour. To make things easier, we have a quick-dry travel wardrobe that is lightweight, washes with ease, and dries in a flash.



Outsmarting Pickpockets

Jordan and Egypt are quite safe when it comes to violent crime. However, they can be “dangerous” in terms of petty theft: Purse-snatching and pickpocketing can be a problem in places where tourists gather. Thieves target Americans — not because they’re mean, but because they’re smart. Americans have all the good stuff in their bags and wallets. Loaded down with valuables, jetlagged, and stumbling around in a strange new environment, we stick out like jeweled thumbs.

Be Prepared. Before you go you can take some steps to minimize your loss in case of theft. Scan your passport, travel documents, and any important information onto a USB drive to bring with you. Leave fancy bling at home.

Avoiding Theft. While not a huge problem in Jordan and Egypt, you will want to be smart and conceal your money, passport, and credit cards in either a waist pouch, or a bag specifically designed to be theft proof. We prefer to wear fanny packs designed for travel. The good thing about these is they often have a slot for your water bottle. Be sure to get a pouch that is RFID protected. Check out our How to Pack document for further suggestions on money belts.

Overall, we feel MUCH safer in the Middle East than most larger US cities! Be smart and aware and you will have no issues. We have yet to have a tour member get pickpocketed!

