

CHECKLIST

Your weekly update on the best deals, new visa procedures and must-visit places

15% off at Ananda before April 15

With summer fast approaching, the world's leading destination spa near Rishikesh in Uttarakhand, Ananda, has announced an attractive summer offer. All the bookings made on or before April 15 will get you 15 per cent discount. This is in addition to the deals already being offered, like the Experience Ananda, Couples Connect, Yogic Detox, and Ladies Spa Getaway packages. Log on to www.ananda-spa.com or call 01378-227500 for details.

For those not game for a long holiday, the Taj Holidays offers exciting options. The Vivanta by Taj at Sawai Madhopur near Ranthambhore National Park has packages starting at ₹19,000 for two nights. The Gateway Hotel at Ramgarh Lodge in Jaipur has packages for ₹12,750. The Gateway Hotel Ganges in Varanasi has two-night packages starting at ₹14,500. The Gateway Hotel Fatehabad Road near Agra has packages for ₹14,500; the Usha Kiran Palace, Gwalior for ₹24,225 and The Gateway Hotel, Jodhpur has deals starting at ₹14,900. Call 011-23415601 or log on to www.swantour.com.

Heritage haveli stay in Amritsar



There's more to Amritsar's heritage than the Golden Temple. Like the WelcomHeritage Ranjit's Svaasa, a 250-year old Nanak Shahi Haveli. It has state-of-the-art facilities along with a highly-rated spa. The good news is that there are great summer offers starting at just ₹8,999 for two nights and three days, including taxes and breakfast. To book call 011-46035500 or mail to holidays@welcomheritagehotels.com.

Travelocity India is giving you the chance to relax at Estrela Do Mar Beach Resort in Goa, a three-star resort near the Calangute Beach. Nestled amid coconut palms, it has 80 rooms, a swimming pool, a garden restaurant and a roof-top restaurant. The three-day/two-nights package from April 2 to 4 costs ₹18,200. Log on to www.travelocity.co.in.

Summer offer at Baikunth Manali



Rediscover yourself in the serene mountains of Baikunth Magnolia situated near a beautiful Deodar forest in Manali. An exclusive summer package, valid till September 30, charges ₹4,400 per room per night. The tariff in this European plan includes luxury accommodation for two adults, tea and coffee in the rooms, 15 per cent discount on any treatment at the spa and no charges for children below five years. Any extra person in the room will be charged at ₹950 per person. For more information log on to www.baikunth.com.

Cox and Kings has launched Private Van Journeys in which six adults travel in a chauffeur-driven van on road across Europe. Package for Switzerland and France for eight days/seven nights costs ₹1,76,275 per person on twin-sharing basis; for Switzerland for seven days/six nights at ₹1,21,790 per person. These journeys are also available across Australia, New Zealand, Africa, China, Egypt, Turkey and Greece. Log on to www.coxandkings.com or call 1800221235, 18002090400, 9867565599.

Flower show on a river cruise

The AMA Waterways is offering a chance to visit the Federal Horticultural Show Koblenz 2011 in this beautiful German town by travelling on one of its seven cruises on the river Rhine. The show is being held from April 15 to October 16. For details on price tags and cruise options, log on to www.amawaterways.com.

Compiled by **Insiya Amir**. Write to her at insiya.amir@mailtoday.in.



The colonnaded street of Cardo runs the length of the city of Jerash for more than a mile. In ancient times it was the main thoroughfare. The marks of chariot wheels are deeply etched on the street's cobblestoned paths.

Lost in Jordan's Roman outpost

It is easy to slide into a reverie at Jerash, Jordan's ancient city that's not moved on yet

By Kalpana Sunder

Asterix and Obelisk kindled my fascination for the Roman Empire. A visit to Rome firmed it. Jerash, Jordan was the icing on the cake. It used to be called Gerasa, 2,000 years ago and was part of a confederation of 10 cities of the Roman Empire called the Decapolis. This was one of the favourite cities of emperor Hadrian.

Jerash's golden age climaxed many years later. Earthquakes buried it under the sand and rubble for centuries (till it was discovered by a German traveller in 1806) and that probably accounts for how well preserved it seems today.

It's an hour's drive from the capital Amman, through dusty roads, rugged rolling hills, desert shrubs and flat roofed white limestone homes. The ticket office at Jerash is strategically placed and makes sure that we first go through a plaza with vendors selling a paraphernalia of souvenirs! What catches my eye is exquisite sand art — landscapes with camels and sand dunes inside bottles and local musical instruments made out of goat skin and wood. We enter triumphantly, like ancient Romans through the magnificent Hadrian's arch. Stretching beyond us is the hippodrome, an ancient sports field. Today it's the venue of a daily seven-lap chariot race complete with shields, swords and gladiators played by Jordanian army regulars!

We walk into the Oval Plaza, the For-



Jordanian soldiers play bagpipes (and drums) at South Theatre — a legacy of Scottish regiments posted there when Jordan was a British protectorate

um, the centre of life in ancient times. This leads to the Colonnaded Street that runs the length of the city for more than a mile and was its main thoroughfare; it's called Cardo. We see the marks of the chariots deeply etched on the cobblestones. There's a Roman drainage system below the stone paving which works even today. As we dream about lost civilisations, Salem our guide urges on us with, "Yalla, yalla..." a term that I soon become familiar with, meaning "Let's move it" in Arabic!

Off the main road is the Macellum — a courtyard built around a fountain. This would have been the ancient food market. Salem draws our eyes to some slabs fashioned like animals — it was the butcher's shop and bears marks from the cutting of meat.

We soon come to the Nymphaeum, a monument to the water nymphs where virgins bathed for the entertainment of soldiers and merchants. I fill up my memory card recklessly, shooting images of the ruined city (my mind lost in a world where people bartered oil and loaves of bread, patricians in blood red tunics and slave girls dancing). In this process, I fall back behind Salem, and lose some three hundred years of history in the bargain. A voice saying, "Postcards, one dollar" shakes me out of the reverie. It's an earnest boy of about six or seven carrying postcards strung on his shoulders. I run behind my group as they walk towards the North Theatre which is

remarkably well-preserved. This structure is steep and as we catch our breath reaching the top tier of seats, we see two Bedouin boys with their herd of goats peer at us from beyond the walls.

We walk past churches built when Christianity took root in the Holy Roman Empire and they stand alongside the temples dedicated to Artemis and Zeus. The Fountain Court in a cathedral's atrium is where a festival dedicated to the God of Wine was held every year, to commemorate Jesus' miracle of turning water into wine. I wonder if I'm imagining things. It's the unmistakable music of bagpipes — a legacy of the Scottish regiments that served here when Jordan was a British protectorate. Soldiers with chiseled physiques, in traditional red and white checked headdresses are playing bagpipes in the South Theatre.

The afternoon sun throws mysterious shadows around the columns of the Artemis temple. Eleven columns of this temple still stand, despite several devastating earthquakes. Salem inserts a long stick between the gargantuan column and the pedestal. It moves up and down demonstrating how they were designed to sway gently (damn, these Romans were really clever!) Ancient anti-earthquake proofing.

We fall completely under the spell of the long gone city architects when we see the Artemis Steps, a long, wide flight of stairs which seem to lead nowhere. But wait, only on the last flight of stairs does the mystery unravel — a majestic temple with pillars silhouetted against the cerulean blue desert sky.

— The author is a Chennai-based travel writer

As we dream about the lost civilisations, our guide urges us on with "Yalla yalla..."