

---

## **AlmaTourism**

Journal of Tourism, Culture and Territorial Development

---

### **The New Scientific and Cultural Excursions of the Italian Geographical Society: "In the Footsteps of Moses" (November 24 – December 4 2012)**

Magistri, P.\*  
University of Rome – Tor Vergata (Italy)

---

The Italian Geographical Society has become a moral entity, attended and controlled by the government (NGO). It is a cultural institution since ever and its history is related to the Italian State. In 1867 it was founded in Florence, the first capital of Italy. Five years later it moved to Rome, the new capital of the unified Italy, where it is still located in a sixteenth-century building, the Palazzetto Mattei in Villa Celimontana. Since its birth, the IGS had the task to organize and to support activities such as travels and explorations within Africa, South America, Central Asia and Papuasias, according to the national colonial policy of the early twentieth century. The same policy was abandoned after the Second World War, when the Society started to work as a cultural Institute related to the university research and study areas.

The heritage of IGS is the "Bulletin of the Italian Geographical Society", one of the oldest academic journals in the world of Geography (since 1868), that includes articles, news and reviews, as well as volumes and specialized catalogs. Furthermore it also has the most important library of its kind in Italy, among the largest in Europe, a Map library, a historical and photographic archive of international value. In addition to its mission i.e. to protect and make available

---

\* E-mail Address: [ufficiosociale@societageografica.it](mailto:ufficiosociale@societageografica.it)

an important cultural heritage to researchers, over the past few years the ISG is following the vocation of research Institute, producing open activities (such as exhibitions, conferences, seminars) and useful studies for the community in geography, but not exclusively.

Based on this cultural and political heritage and in a perspective of "geographical experience", the Italian Geographic Society started since 2008 to propose study trips with the participation of members and friends of the Society, such as geographers and not only, all with the spirit to renew the cultural and scientific journey experience. The study trips to places and public institutions decline with wider debates and cultural exchanges between the participants, allowing to enlance new scientific and cultural partnership.

After a first trip to Ethiopia in 2008, then to Armenia in 2009 and to Morocco in 2010, other two thematic trips were organized. Although they were referring to the same country they were planned around streets and historical routes. The first was on the Via Egnatia, the Roman road that still constitutes a fundamental and strategic infrastructure in the East-West relations from Durres to Istanbul. The last travel wanted to retrace the itinerary of the Jewish exodus. It was significantly entitled "In the Footsteps of Moses", intending to retrace the main steps of the route taken by the Jewish during the exodus from the land of Pharaoh to the Promised Land. This itinerary also brought forty three participants in to an excursion to ideally remake the way from Egypt to Jordan. It is not a road then, but the idea of a trip which may be taken as a metaphorical journey related to the spiritual and politics. Something often difficult to find on the map and also controversial in some step, such as the crossing of the Red Sea. We considered appropriated to report this last experience by presenting a travel notebook. The reference countries are Egypt, Jordan and places of Alexandria, Tanis, Ismailia, Amari Lakes, the Sinai Peninsula, Mount Horeb, Nuweiba, Aqaba, Wadi Rum, Petra, Dead Sea, Mount Nebo, Madaba and Amman.

The first day we had the transfer from Rome to Cairo and then we arrived by bus directly to our first destination, Alexandria.

The second day in Egypt, we immersed into the today's urban reality of the town founded by Alexander the Great at the mouth of the Nile river. That was the first of the homonymous cities founded by the great leader between 332 and 333 BC. With more than 4 million inhabitants (estimates data 2012) it covers 32 km along the Mediterranean coast in the northern part of the country and it is the largest city located on the same coast, as well. It is the main Egyptian port and the second largest city of the country, along its 32 km on the Mediterranean coast. To the glorious past of one of the most important port and commercial center of the Mediterranean, crossroads of peoples and cultures, and crucial point of terrestrial and marine routes - demonstrated by significant and still visible archaeological remains from various ages – it opposes today the image of a simple and much more degraded city more than one might be expected. We perceived this situation not only from the first approach to the city, but also during the visit at the Alexandria University, situated in a campus that was looking ancient. Over there a delegation of the Italian Geographical Society was very kind welcomed from the teaching staff, the students and the representatives of Egyptian Geographical Society, with the typical warmth of the Mediterranean people (Fig.1). Then we made a tour through the Alexandria streets where we observed the very different realities: although in certain districts we appreciated the way to design and build, typical of the European popular canon traditions of the nineteenth and twentieth century, we could especially admire the results of the Italian architects and urban planners, who left an important sign in the modern tissue of the city. However, and especially along the seafront, it was also possible to see that many housing facilities (entire buildings!) were totally abandoned and that contrasted with the prestigious areas (Fig. 2). As a result of the urban expansion occurred in coincidence with the Nasser's rise to power, before (January 16, 1956 –

September 28, 1970), and after of Sadat (15 October 1970-6 October 1981), many buildings have been constructed without a detailed planning and with the use of inappropriate techniques and materials able to last over time. For this reason, now, most of these buildings are unsafe and in a state of abandon. This situation, together with the absence of a basic sense of urban decor, visible along the streets, contributes to give a degraded image of the city (Fig. 3 and 4). However, opposite to this decadence appearance there is the magnificence of the new Alexandrina Library (Fig.5). It probably can not be compared to the historical one, for the amount of stored materials. However, it is proposed as legitimate successor of the most famous library of the ancient age for architectural importance of the building, for the technologies developed in the service for users and also for the articulation of the interior spaces. As declared by some archaeologists, it would probably be located in the same place where was launched the existing one in October 16, 2002. A walk in the archaeological site of the Alexandrian school where Hypatia taught (Fig. 6) was an unforgettable experience, as a place of memory and expression of the intangible heritage of the Alexandrian and Mediterranean culture (Fig. 6).

Particularly interesting was also the visit to some cult places still active in town, that testify the importance of this center in the past, as regards the three major religions of the Book. Specifically, the existence of the Sephardic synagogue of Eliyahu Hanavi, the only survived among those existing in the past, is one of the few traces of the Jewish community's vitality in Egypt. Just after the Second World War, the community was composed of about 80,000 people in the whole country, while today it is reduced to a few dozen (around twenty of which in Alexandria, mostly women, so as required by Jewish law it is no longer possible to officiate the cult in the synagogue of Eliyahu Hanavi without the presence of guests coming mainly from Israel). Also interesting was to visit both the Coptic Orthodox Church of St. Mark, and the Coptic Catholic Church of St. Catherine, that remind the very ancient Christian presence in Egypt, dated to the preaching

of Mark the Evangelist. Instead, mosques are in large number, with their minarets towering in the sky of the town and competing in importance and beauty of structures. Among them we could visit Abu Al-Abbas Al-Mursi, the largest of Alexandria, entitled to an Andalusian Sheikh, that evidence the connections between the northern shore of the Mediterranean and the South over the centuries.

On the fourth day of travel we left Alexandria and we moved to Ismailia, where we arrived in the evening. During the travel we crossed the Nile Delta, where the lush green of the crops was alternated to more or less large villages, served by very often dusty and dirty roads, along which antiquated and highly pollutant vehicles passed through, in addition to carts pulled by pack animals. During the day we stopped in San el-Hagar, Tanis and Tal Basta, where we could visit important archaeological sites, the evidence of the vitality that the actual region of Sharqiya expressed in the ancient times. Especially the archaeological site of Tanis (Fig. 7) has been an important occasion, because it represents the first stop of the exodus. Founded towards the end of the twentieth dynasty, it became the capital of the northern part of Egypt under the kings of XXI and XXII dynasties. It was the place where Ramses II reigned and where the exodus of the Jews began under the leadership of Moses. It was an important strategic and commercial center and the main Egyptian harbor, as well, until the almost total destruction done by the waters of Manzala Lake in the sixth century. After this event the town was abandoned.

The next day (the fifth of the trip), after a stop at the Amari Lakes (Fig. 8) and a visit to the Springs of Moses (Ain Musa Fig. 9), we could admire a jewel of engineering work of the nineteenth century, the Suez Canal. After the crisis and the unavailability of the channel among the fifties and seventies (twentieth century), due to the strong tensions of France, UK and Israel, on the one hand, and Egypt on the other hand for the nationalization of the channel, this artificial waterway was experiencing a new season of traffic between old Europe and

Asia, especially with the development of the emerging Asian economies (China and India). In the afternoon, the march started again to the famous monastery of St. Catherine in the Sinai Peninsula, where the signs of the israelian occupation between 1967 and 1978 can still be found.

After crossing the Sinai desert, first sandy and then rocky (Figures 10 and 11), we arrived close to the monastery of St. Catherine in the evening, where a delegation organized itself for the nocturnal excursion to Mount Horeb (2.244 m. high), the Mount of Theophany, where Moses received the Tablets of the Law. The next morning we left the base camp (1,500 m) at 2.00a.m. (sixth day), and we earned the top around 5.00 a.m., when it started to dawn (Fig. 12). From the peak of the holy mountain we could watch throughout the surrounding area with the first light of day. On the way back to the base camp, we met the rest of the travelers who did not participate to the climb and we visited together the famous monastery, which is proposed for centuries as a bulwark of the human presence in a desert land. There "holy monks are doing their best to transplant trees with lot of perseverance, to heal small orchards and vegetable gardens, even close to their hermitages: one might believe that they get some profit from the land of the mountain, but the fruits are rather produced by their hands "(Itinerarium Egeriae). In the monastery, it was possible to experience an austere and solemn place: getting in contact with the coenoby environments and, even more, with the precious handmade paintings, documentaries and liturgical objects stored in the monastery complex, we had the impression to go back in time, when those isolated corners of the world were lived only by hermits and Christian cenobites. Once again on route, the journey continued to Nuweiba on the Red Sea, where we embarked to reach the port of Aqaba on the Jordanian shore.

The Jordanian port city was very different compared to the corresponding Egyptian town. It was the concrete expression of passing a border, starting from the perception of the space organization and the territorial planning: a more

accurate and rational organization of the urban and sub-urban areas and a more dynamic expansion of the town, gave signals of a State that is not delayed and not obstructed in the past, but is full of vitality and looks ahead to the future. The next morning (seventh day), especially, Aqaba showed all its modernity: on the way from the hotel to the port, where a boat was waiting for us with the hull partially transparent to let us live the ideal crossing of the Red Sea and let us admire the beauty of the seabed of the Gulf of Aqaba, it was possible to see the vivacity of the port area with considerable infrastructure works due to the construction of the new harbor.

Back from the excursion by boat, we continued into the desert of Wadi Rum (Fig. 13, 14 e 15), characterized by mountains of red/mustard sandstone and pinkish sand, and which became particularly well-known in the West thanks to the events of the popular secret agent and archaeologist Lawrence of Arabia. Once arrived, we had lunch in a Bedouin camp. Although it presented the characteristics of a structure made only for tourism purposes –not really authentic - it allowed us to imagine or, better, to experience the illusion of how it could be important the moment of the meal in a Bedouin camp (Fig. 16). But the most exciting experience in the desert was the off road excursion for sure, when we took direct contact with the desert, with its sand and rocks formations, which, in the late afternoon, silhouetted against a crimson sky, like a painting of a rare beauty in front of which the spectator is enchanted.

We left the desert of Wadi Rum and the journey continued to Petra, where we arrived in the evening. The following morning (eighth day) the ancient city of Nabataean revealed itself in its full splendor: after covering the narrow gorge originated by water, which in the past flowed abundant, the look opened, like to a stage, on El-Kahzneh, more commonly known as “the Treasure”, and expanded on the ruins of the ancient sacred settlement, with its skillfully architecture carved into the reddish sandstone (Figs. 17 and 18). This vision let us to imagine at which level of richness the Nabataeans arrived through the

centuries. They founded their fortune on the passage of trade caravans that were transporting precious goods from the East to the shores of the Mediterranean.

It is along this ancient way, crossed by caravans of merchants and known as Kings Road, that the following morning (ninth day) we continued our journey until the shores of the Dead Sea (Fig. 19), where it was possible to experience the "floating". In fact, the high salt concentration in the water allow the bodies to float easier than in other seas. In the afternoon of the same day, after a relaxing stop and a bath in the Dead Sea, the trip continued on the heights of Mount Nebo, where ideally ended the excursion "In the footsteps of Moses". From the Holy Mountain, today care of the Franciscan, Friars Minor of the Custody of the Holy Land, indeed Moses, the guide of the Jewish people par excellence, was able to show the Promised Land by God to his people and on the same mountain he died and was buried (Fig. 20 and 21). Down from Nebo, the next stop was the town of Madaba, where, in the greek orthodox church of St. George, part of a beautiful mosaic of the sixth century AD is preserved. It represents a map of the Holy Land of that time, an extraordinary document of historical geography, which originally measured 25 meters by 5After a tour through the narrow streets of the town center, full of small shops and bazaars with every kind of merchandise, the trip continued to Amman, the last stop over before coming back to Italy.

In the Jordanian capital, the last day (the tenth day of the trip), we made an institutional visit at the State University, which looked as a modern and progressive reality with a very well maintained and organized campus. There were the Pro Rector and the Professor of Geography to welcome us. We had very interesting information exchanges about the functioning of the Universities and the possible cooperation between Italian Universities and the University of Jordan. After the institutional meeting, we made a visit in the town center where we saw the mixture between the ancient ruins (especially Roman,



Byzantine and Muslim), the evidence of a long history, and the modern instances of a dynamic capital, projected into the future, where the typical bazaars and suk alternate modern buildings and residential areas characterized by the Western standards.

We finished our adventure in Amman, the capital of the Hashemite Kingdom. The eleventh day trip we took the plane back to Italy from the international airport "Queen Alia", ready for the next study trip scheduled between Eritrea and Yemen, to the shores of the Sea pearls, an Italian history and geography, as well.

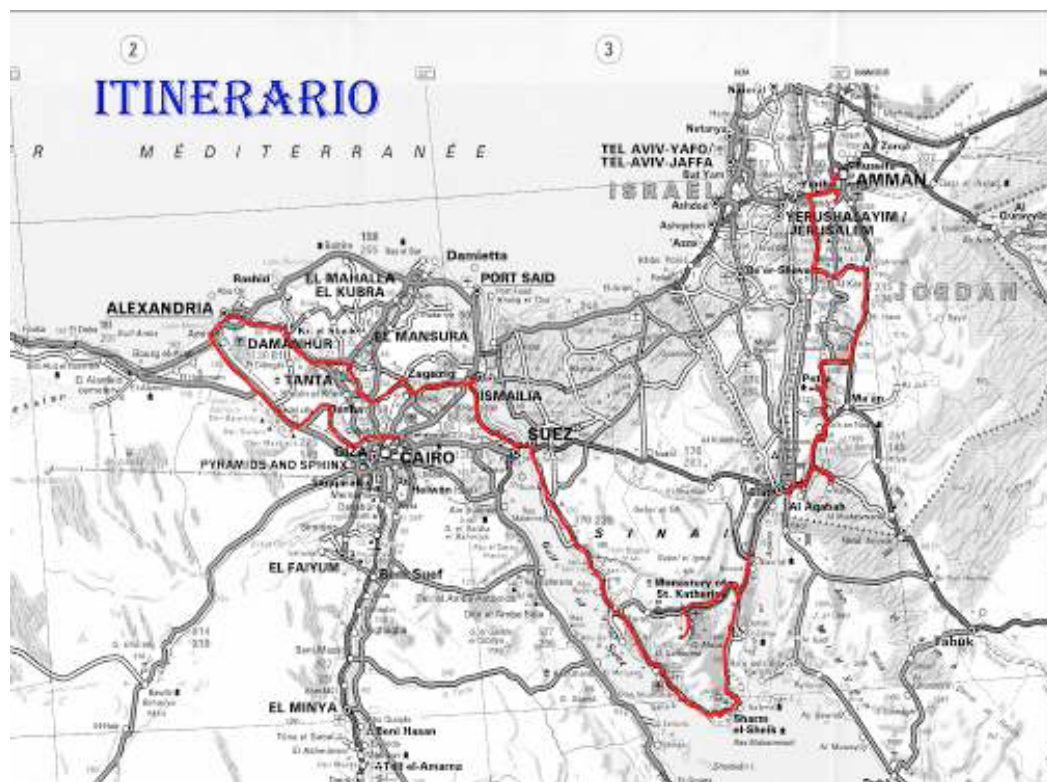


Fig. 0 The study tour of the IGS "In the Footsteps of Moses"



Fig.1. The headquarters of the IGS section of the Alexandria University. Photo of F. Dallari



Fig.2. The beach in Alexandria's seafront. Photo of F. Dallari



Fig.3. The column of Pompey. Photo of F. Dallari



Fig.4. In front of the column of Pompey



Fig.5. Bibliotheca Alexandrina (google maps)



Fig. 6. The School of Alexandria. Photo of F. Dallari



Fig. 7. Tanis at sunset (IGS). Photo of F. Dallari



Fig. 8. The sunset on the Amari lakes. Photo of F. Dallari



Fig.9. The springs of Moses with small boutique tents for tourists. Photo of F. Dallari



Fig 10. Field Bedouins in the Sinai desert.



Fig.11. The rocky desert of the Sinai. Photo of F. Dallari



Fig.12. The sunrise on Mount Sinai



Fig.13. The Wadi Rum. Photo of F. Dallari



Fig.14. The Wadi Rum (Tourism of contemplation).





Fig.15. Tea time. Photo of F. Dallari

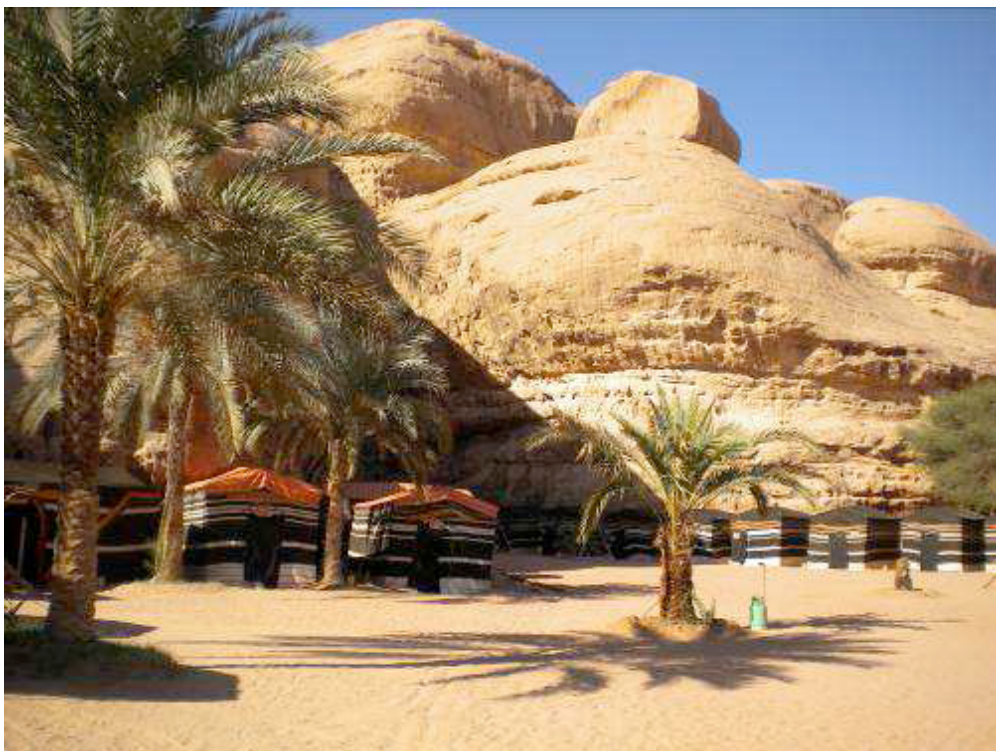


Fig. 16. Restaurant-hotel in Wadi Rum. Photo of F. Dallari



Fig. 17. All together along the canyon of Petra. Foto di F. Dallari



Fig. 18. Sustainable Tourism? Photo of F. Dallari



Fig. 19. To the Dead Sea. Photo of F. Dallari



Fig.20. The final step: Mount Nebo. Photo of F. Dallari



Fig.21. The study trip "In the footsteps of Moses." Photo of F. Dallari