

Improved Highways Put Most of Mideast Within Reach of Motorist

EDITOR'S NOTE: Last summer a United Press International correspondent set out from London in a small car and drove to Beirut. Since then he has driven over much of the Middle East. With the summer vacation season in sight again, he suggests tourists may want to try it.)

By DAVID DUGAS
United Press International
Beirut - Driving your own car around Europe is a wonderful way to spend a holiday. But why stop there?

With less trouble than you might imagine, you can steer the family car on to Beirut, the Holy Land or across the desert to Baghdad.

Jet airliners have taken a lot of the tourist business away from camel caravans, Mediterranean steamers and the Orient Express. But improved highways have put a sizable chunk of the Arab world within reach of anyone with sturdy car, some holiday savings, spare time and a yen to see places up close.

Statistics aren't available, but evidence indicates growing numbers of tourists are driving their cars from Europe to the Middle East.

Anywhere in Europe will do for a starting point. I set out from London last summer in a four-cylinder, English-made (Austin A40) car. After crossing the English Channel in one of the regularly scheduled air ferries, I landed at Ostend, Belgium.

From there it was smooth going through Belgium, Germany and Austria to Vienna with super highways almost all the way.

Day's Drive

From Vienna it's a day's drive south to the Yugoslav border at Maribor and on to Zagreb. The capital, Belgrade, is four hours along the Autoput, Yugoslavia's best highway.

Until last year American tourists were obliged to detour around Communist Bulgaria through northern Greece to get to Turkey. Now that diplomatic relations between the U. S. and the Bulgars have resumed, American tourists are welcomed along the shorter route through Sofia and Plovdiv to the Turkish border and Istanbul.

A 20-minute ferry boat ride gets you across the Bosphorus and on your way to Ankara. From the Turkish capital it's a day's drive across the Anatolian Plain through Konya to Adana near the Turkish south coast.

A winding but well-paved road follows the eastern Mediterranean coast south through the United Arab Republic's Syrian Region and into Lebanon and Beirut.

From this bustling port city it is only a two-and-a-half hour drive over spectacular mountains to the ancient Syrian capital of Damascus. From there it is only a few hours farther south to Jerusalem in the heart of the Holy Land or along the eastern shores of the Dead Sea to the Jordanian capital of Amman.

From Jerusalem's old city quarter on the Jordanian side of the divided city, one can pass through Mandelbaum Gate and into Israel, but it's a one-way trip. The car can leave Israel only by ship, the passengers only by ship or plane whose destination is outside the Arab Middle East.

From Amman more ambitious travelers can head still farther south over a newly completed highway to Jordan's port city of Aqaba on the Gulf of Aqaba which separates Egypt's Sinai Peninsula and Saudi Arabia. The road passes near the ancient, rock-carved city of Petra.

Visa restrictions and distance have kept overland travelers to Iraq down to a bare trickle, but it is possible to drive from Amman to Baghdad over a well-paved highway in less than 10 hours.

Once across the Austrian border, the trip is not all easy going. The main routes through Yugoslavia and Turkey include some long sections of rough old roads - or new ones still under construction. A mechanical breakdown or accident in a desolate area could wreck a vacation schedule. But gasoline stations and mechanics are plentiful enough to handle ordinary maintenance.

Hazardous

Night time traveling can be hazardous. Routes often are poorly marked. Donkey carts travel main roads without lights. Broken down trucks are left unlighted along so-called super highways.

Driving only by day though, the average driver can get from Vienna to Beirut in less than a week.

Unexpected things happen along the way. In Yugoslavia there are so few cars that pedestrians clog the streets. Most of the time they have them to themselves. My modestly proportioned car drew crowds of curious Yugoslavs.

I gave a lift to a Frenchman who was hitchhiking from Paris to Beirut and a Dane from Copenhagen who was thumbing his way to Calcutta.

In Bulgaria the small farms found in Yugoslavia give way to endless tracts of collective wheat fields that curiously resemble the sprawling farms of the American Midwest. The main highway, much of it paved with stones, is narrow but surprisingly well maintained. Roadside billboards alternately advertise Toto, the national lottery, and the government's latest production goals.

Turkey offers some of the most spectacular scenery, and some of the dullest. The roads are among the best and worst to be found between Europe and the Middle East. Turkish children exhibit a lively curiosity about what will happen if they throw a stick or rock under your passing car. This is not an unfriendly sport aimed against foreigners. Turkish drivers get the same treatment.

The Syrians can be very friendly, depending on what day you happen to catch them. Lebanon has the best roads in the Middle East. It also has the most cars and the wildest drivers. Traffic experts from Rome were called in two years ago, but they had to give up, which should give you an idea. To avoid the traffic you can go back to Bulgaria.

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