



A Stroll Through The Sunderbans-2 Travel Briefs

My forester friend was surely demoralised when he found out that I was not very happy with his work, as he had given all he could to ensure my comfort. There was then no time to search for an alternate place. I took a hurried meal and scrambled up on the machan hide with a forest guard named Shajahan, believed to be the most courageous man among the guards and boatmen. Nevertheless, the machan was a comfortable one which commanded an excellent view of the grassy clearing, and we settled there in silence for our night vigil. My comrade Shajahan carried an old markfour rifle and I carried a hand axe and a water-bottle along with torches. I didn't bring any food with me as that may call in ants.

After settling on the machan, I could see around as we still had at least half of an hour of day light left. Several herds of deer were already in the meadow busy with fresh browsing. They had seen us climbing up on the machan and kept a respectable distance but I could count about forty-four heads of them of different age group and sex within my range of vision. I always have a mix feeling about these creatures. Among the two species, Chital is well distributed all over the Sunderban and particularly found abundant in sea-facing jungles. The other species, the barking deer, is a solitary creature and is found only in the northern boundary of the forest on two sides of the Pussur river.

Chitals, are the most wary animals of the jungle. They are blessed with most acute eye sight, hearing and sense of smell, but they have no defense against their natural predators other than their two swift pairs of legs. I don't know whether the antler of the stag play any significant role in their defense against super predators like tigers. I could see and hear several groups of Chitals waiting in the edge of the woods suspecting some unseen danger. The sentinel of the herd, usually a doe stamps its frontleg on the ground and blows a high pitched sharp note. After the sentinel en-

ured complete safety, the whole herd came in the open grazing field.

On the northern edge of the meadow, I could see a red jungle fowl scratching on the forest ground for insects. As the sun gradually went down, the sky above us was

birds are very alert creatures and their alarm call "Did you do it", is very reliable for all jungle animals. Their Bengali name is 'Hot ti ti'.

As the moon crept higher up all sounds around me

by Khasru Choudhury

prefers to remain silent during these quiet moments in the still jungle. But, my companion Shajahan likes to talk about his brave deeds. He found in me a very interested audience of his courageous

from my machan. Nothing could be seen beyond this range and animals appeared as solid dark objects. Some of the deer came so close to my machan that I could hear their tear the grass. On the clear sky a group of flying foxes hovered around on the

best of sentinels in the jungle. They are very weary animals and try to be vocal at every suspected object and scents.

During night adventure in jungles you can get help from lapwings in the grassy clearing, but in the dense woods you must depend on deer as other animals either least about the approaching danger. The monkeys may scream in moon lit nights or an owl may stop hooting, but this is not enough to warn you against any forthcoming danger. But in day time, the pied mynas and the black drongs are the most reliable caller while facing any danger. They not only scream at the predator but also help to locate its presence by hovering on the site of approaching danger. You can completely rely on these birds.

However, presently my companion started to snore in his sleep scaring grazing animals in our vicinity. Although none of the deer gave any alarm call but they were sufficiently nervous and kept a good distance I started to feel helpless but didn't dare to wake him up as he might have started on his endless jungle stories, again. My mind was put to rest when I saw that after a few moments of nervousness, the deer started to graze again.

I gave up on any hope of concentrating on the sound of the jungle and instead started to use my eye sight to locate for animals. If you want to strain your eye sight there's no better way than searching for animals in the darkness of the forests. When you are looking close quarters then it's alright for your eyes, but when you have to watch further your eye has to widen your pupil more; and if you have to do this for a considerable time, your eye tissue will soon become tired. This may lead to blurred or distorted vision.

Another problem in full moon is the shadow casting of the foliage. The foliage casts a sharp shadow and makes it very difficult to distinguish an animal in the shaded zone. If the wind blows then the agitation of the shadow may seem to be an approaching predator.

To be continued



A lonely deer in the wilderness

— The Vanishing Jungle

suddenly streamed by a huge flock of screaming jungle mynah, heading towards a tree.

Jungle fowls began to crow in a note different from their tame cousins. The sharp and high-pitched note of the nightjars startled in us a strong jungle feeling. Also the gecko lizard had begun its evening incantation: Tok-key, Tok-key! it went on. The cicadas had also joined in the jungle concert.

Looking straight I could see five or six red wailed lapwing busy in selecting their night halage merely two hundred yards from my machan. These territorial

ceased except the continuous booming sound of the rushing waves, which suggested that high tide was on its way. Stillness in the wilderness sometimes become unbearable to human beings.

The transition time between day and night is very interesting feature in wild areas, as day-active animals retreats for their night shelter and the night-active animals prawl for their nocturnal activity. Most of the animals who prey on living creature in sight active. Their prey species pass a weary time during these transition hours, for their lives.

Most living creatures

actions. His vast experience with jungle creatures provided him with lot of stories to tell. But at a time like that not even the world's most interested listener could patiently listen to any stories, as the sound would betray our camouflage. I tried to explain to him that it was important to remain silent, but it did not seem to have any effect on him. So, with sheer frustration I told him to go to sleep.

As silence fell again I started to look around me and could distinguish the grazing animals like pigs and deer by their shape, upto about two hundred metres

their delicate skinny wings. On my left a lone bird kept calling continuously. Its call resembled the tree pie: kikk-kring, kikk-kring. I had heard them on other occasions in different places, specially during full moon.

Also I could hear the hooting of an owl, but I was unable to locate it as it is difficult to identify the source when the volume of the note is high and pitch is so low. On my left I heard some distant alarm call of a female deer, but it did not persist for long, so I safely concluded that there was nothing to fear. I knew from experience that deer were not always the

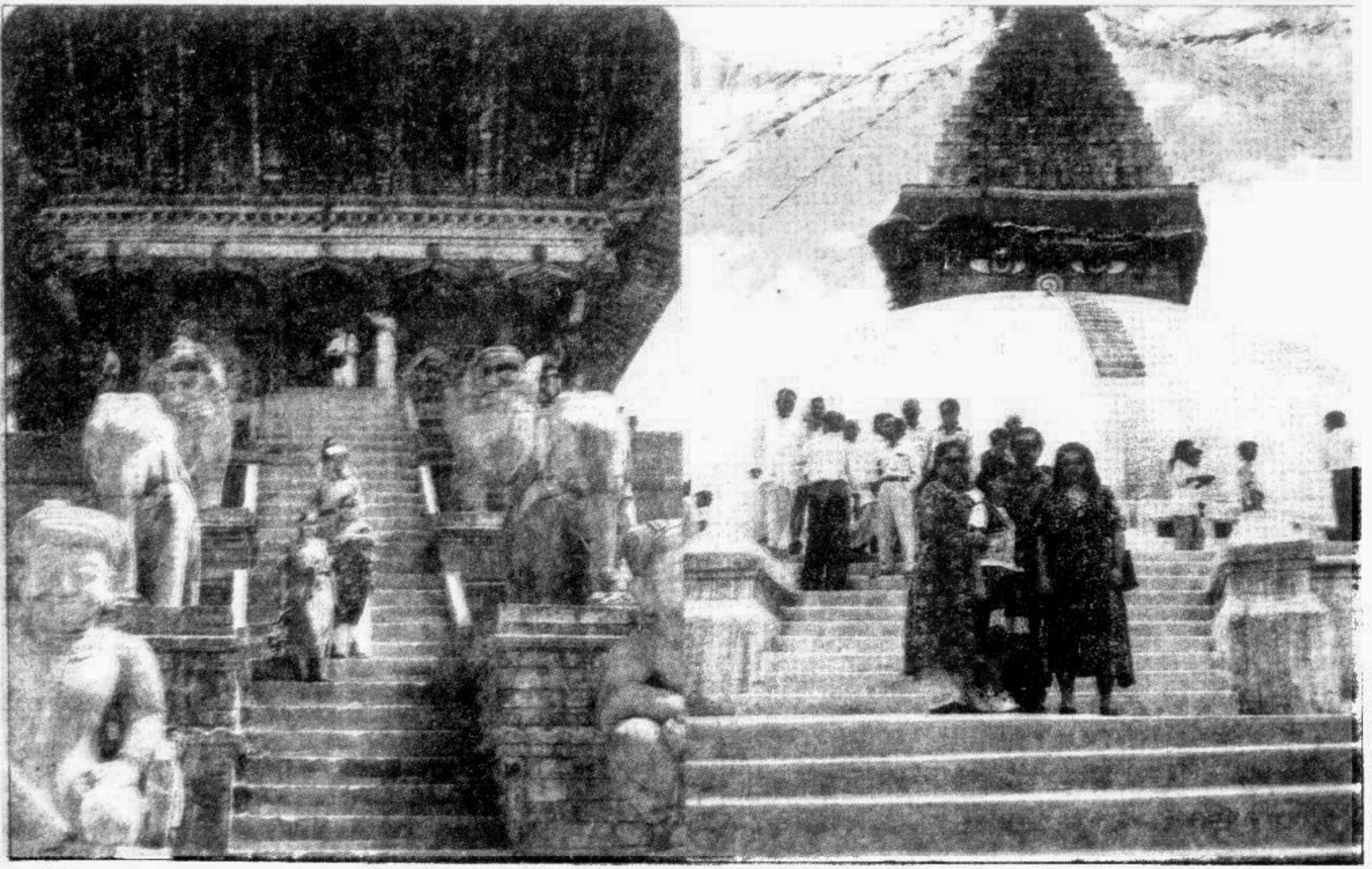
Kathmandu Fact File

Where to Stay
HERE is no shortage of world class hotels in Kathmandu like the Annapurna and Yak & Yeti in Durbar Marg, the Shangri-La in Lazimpat, the Holiday Inn at Tahachal and the Everest

tered taxis (with black registration plates) ranging from old Toyota Corollas to modern luxury saloons. The more adventurous can try the three wheeler tempos or bicycle rickshaws. Buses are to be avoided unless you enjoy be-

star hotels. The tourist area in Thamel offers scores of excellent restaurants whose prices have hardly increased since the 1970's! Try their fixed breakfasts from under \$2.

performing incredible body contortions, devotees submerging themselves in the holy Bagmati river, monkeys ready to steal your snacks and bodies being cremated at the ghats. Alternatively you may want to come face to



Visitors in Nepal
in New Baneshwor. The excellent Hotel Vajra behind Swayambhunath and Dwarka's Kathmandu Village in Battispatali are more of a cultural experience while the Kathmandu Guest House in Thamel still remains a favourite with world travellers. Also in Thamel, the more budget minded can find an abundance of lodges with names like Yeti Cottage and Yak Lodge all offering basic accommodation from around \$5.

Eat Your Heart Out
French, Japanese, Thai, Russian, Italian, Mexican, Tibetan-Kathmandu is a diner's paradise. Up market restaurants can be found in the Durbar Marg area and five-

ing packed in like a sardine and don't mind sitting next to someone's pet goat! Motorbikes are cheap to hire and private cars can be hired with a chauffeur (contact any travel agent or hotel). The cheapest and best way to get around the city and valley is to hire a bicycle-be it an Indian 'Hero' or a foreign BMX.

Places to Visit
Kathmandu is jam packed with fascinating places. Visiting the Buddhist stupas of Swayambhunath and Boudnath is an experience in itself while the National Museum in Chauanni, the Tribhuban Museum in Hanuman Dhoka and the Natural History Museum behind Swayambhunath offer fascinating insights into Nepal's history, people and art.

Tourists Pour Across the River Jordan

Amy Henderson writes from Amman
No room at the inn — that expression had its origins in the Middle East, but its current significance in Jordan is threatening to put the brakes on one of the most significant economic spin-offs of that country's peace treaty with Israel.

When the peace treaty was signed last October, Jordanians began looking forward to an economic resurgence, with the tourism industry at the forefront. Visitors drawn by the country's many historical and biblical sites, and reassured by the new era of political stability, have started pouring in.

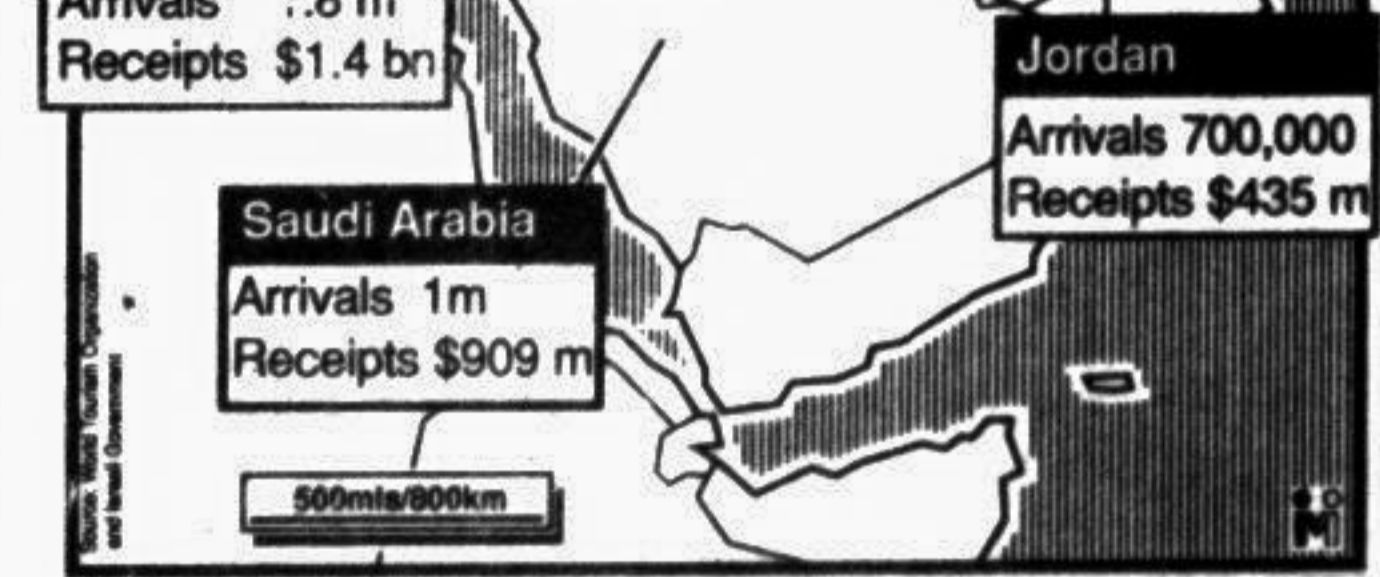
But the country's tourism infrastructure is battling to cope. And that has forced tourist industry leaders and government officials to act decisively. There is no doubting that the tourist boom is real. Minister of Tourism Abdul Ilah Khatib reported that arrivals to the kingdom during the first third of the year were 40 per cent higher than for the same period in 1994.

The increase is generally attributed to the "Israeli invasion". Doves of both Arab and Jewish Israelis arrive daily. It is estimated that 52,000 Israelis travelling on Israeli passports visited Jordan during the first half of this year, while the number arriving on other passports pushes this figure still higher. Travel agents report that Jordan has also become attractive to other important tourist markets. North American tourism has grown by 82 per cent over last year, while the European market has increased by 41 per cent.

That is the good news. But local tour operators say that without major investment, this boom will turn bust. This year's high season began in mid-March, and from the outset tour operators have been scrambling to secure rooms and transportation for large tour groups. Amman's four five-star hotels have been operated at 90 to 95 per cent occupancy since April and managers expect that to continue. Jordan currently has only 8,680 hotel rooms. Tour operators and the Ministry of Tourism believe that needs to be doubled — and soon.

Until recently, Jordan's only tourist bus company was the Jordan Express Tourist Transport Company (JETT). Earlier this spring, the cabinet ended JETT's 20-year monopoly because the company could not meet demand. Travel agents say confusion reigned during the first half of this season. Hotel reservations were not

fill a tourist's itinerary for a week. Yet, the average stay of tourists in Jordan, says the ministry, is only four days. In neighbouring Israel, the average stay is 10 to 14 days. "If tourists decided to stay, where would we put them all and how would we move them around the kingdom?" asks George Babab, proprietor of Jordan's largest tour agency. "We can only keep them here if we have places for them to stay." For decades, tourism was largely ignored by the Jordanian government even though it constitutes about 12 per cent of its Gross



Established by some of Amman's major hoteliers and two more in May. There are plenty of other lucrative opportunities. The 20-kilometre, mostly undeveloped Dead Sea shoreline has only two hotels. By contrast, the western shoreline, on the Israeli side, boasts dozens of health spas attracting tens of thousands of visitors each year. In addition to priority zones like this, the government is keen on attracting investment to expand the small airport at the Red Sea resort city of Aqaba — another major tourist destination. Expected features include 100 per cent ownership for foreign companies, land sales to foreigners and tax holidays for between seven and 12 years. Even without these incentives, the first investors have already made moves. French-owned ACCOR, one of Europe's largest hotel and travel groups, has teamed up with a local contracting company and plans to spend \$55 million on hotels in Amman, Aqaba, Petra and the Dead Sea. ACCOR is also building a chain of hotels in Israel. Imex International from the United States plans to build a \$3.5 million health spa complex at the Dead Sea, beginning in January. Jordanian investors have also begun making moves. New hotels are planned in Amman and in the priority tourist zones. These, says the Tourism Ministry, will add 1,500 new rooms within a year. All this growth is not just seen as a bid to make tourists happy. Jobs are being created and foreign exchange generated. And economic stability, many believe, is the best possible way of making sure that the region's fragile peace holds. — GEMINI NEWS

Getting Around
There are plenty of me-

AMY HENDERSON is a staff reporter on the Jordan Times.