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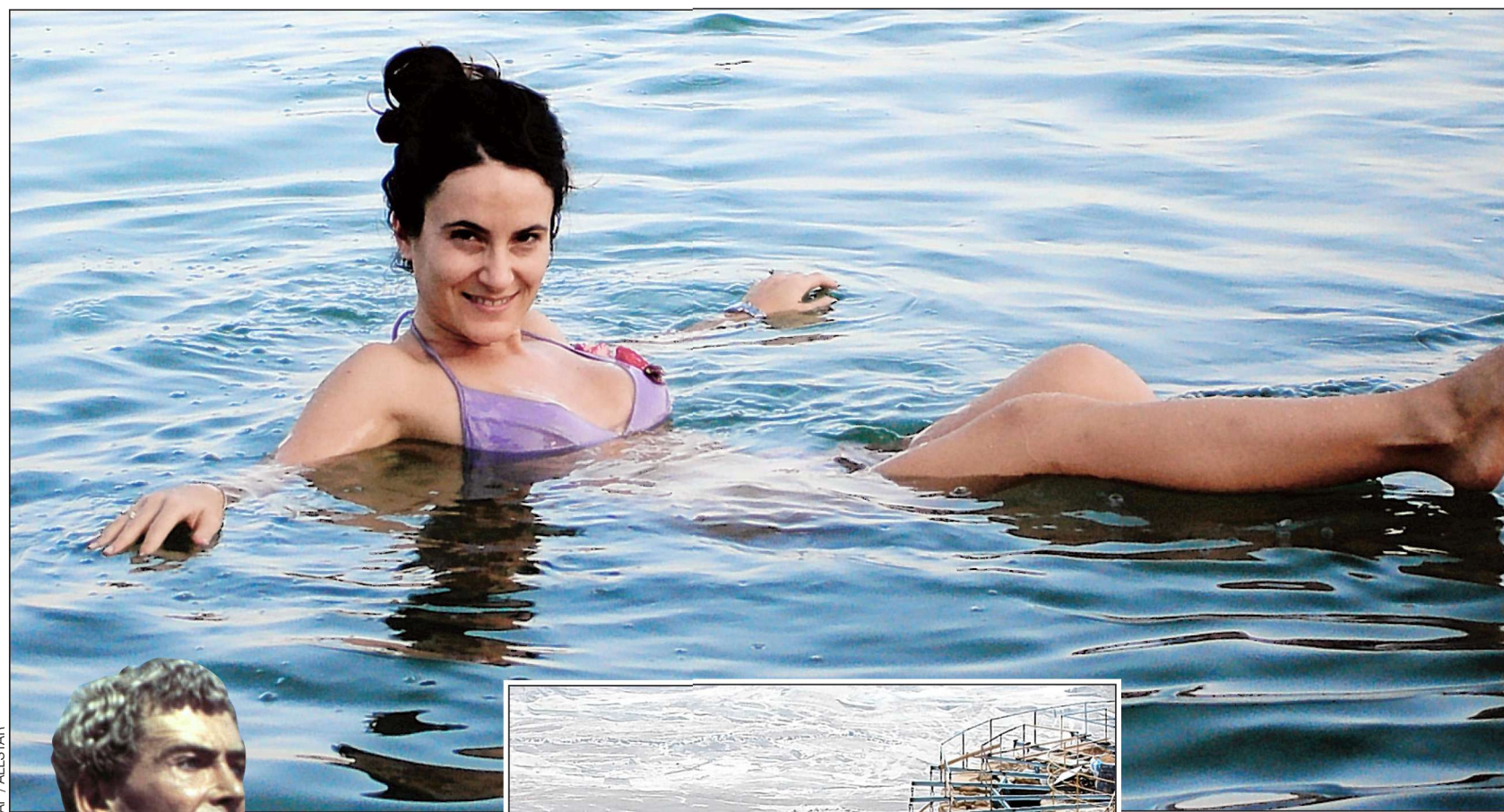
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On my Dead Sea hols

HIGHER and higher the cable car glides through the air and I catch my first dramatic glimpse of Masada. Rising 1,500ft above the Dead Sea, the sienna-tinted plateau lies wakeful like a predator, on the eastern edge of Israel's Judean desert, ringed by gorges.

Eytan is our storyteller for the day. As we are ushered into his office, he does not even look up. Surrounded by thick, dusty volumes, maps, ibex horns, a bottle of Jack Daniel's and awards now yellowing with age, he is trying to fix his watch with glue. A natural raconteur with a bent for archaeology redolent of Indiana Jones, his passion for his subject is unmistakable.

After roaming the dusty remains of an ancient Jewish fortress, Alice Bianchi-Clark takes a soak in the salty water of a modern Israeli resort



RIPPLES OF THE PAST: Alice relaxes in the buoyant waters of the Dead Sea. Left: Peter O'Toole in the TV mini-series Masada, which was based on the famous siege at the cliff-top stronghold, right

What struck his imagination when he first arrived here, aged 17, was the story.

"Many archaeological sites have a history but they have no story," he says. "This one has survived through Josephus, a 1st Century Jewish historian. 'The rest is legend,' says Eytan with a dismissive wave.

Meandering through Masada's remains, I am drawn to the wide stone walls, fragments of frescoes in Pompeian-red and geometric mosaics. These remains may require more imagination than the temple of Karnak, the Acropolis or the Roman Forum, but for story and setting, Masada holds no match.

Rediscovered in 1838, excavated in 1963 and declared a Unesco World Heritage Site in 2001, Masada (meaning fortress in Hebrew) was first adopted by King Herod in 40 BC as a refuge and later transformed into his three-tiered winter home. When completed, it featured dove-breeding columbariums and luxury store rooms stocked with Italian wine and prized garum (fish paste) from Lusitania, the present-day Portugal.

"But you can't live here unless you solve the water problem and he did it!" cries Eytan. Herod devised an enormous and ingenious water supply system to sustain agriculture, gardens, fountains, Roman-style bathhouses and swimming pools.

After the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD, Masada remained the last Jewish stronghold against the power of Rome. Led by Roman general Flavius Silva, 70,000 soldiers camped at the base of Masada. There was a tedious siege lasting many months. With the nearest source of water 20 miles away and the hot months of summer looming, the Romans hastily erected a

rampart and battering ram to breach the wall.

The Jews tried to barricade the wall but the Romans set the battering ram ablaze. It was the night of Passover. Roman victory was tangible.

Led by Eleazar Ben Yair, 960 rebels decided to take their own lives rather than be captured. "Defeat meant children taken as slaves, wives raped, men crucified or fed to the lions in the Colosseum. The Jews burnt everything except for the food stores. They wanted the Romans to know they had not gone hungry," says Eytan.

Hidden in a cave, only two women and five children survived to tell the tale.

My father professed to know all about Masada. "Of course, brilliant, brilliant," he gushed, "there is a film of Masada, the one with thingy, what's-his-name, you know... He may be familiar with the story but clearly my father is hopeless with names.

ACTUALLY, Masada was a 1981 TV mini-series directed by Boris Sagal and starring Peter O'Toole as Flavius Silva. Much of the series, which won an Emmy and was nominated for several Golden Globes, was filmed in the Judean desert.

What really made my heart jump were the replicas of the ostraca (shards of pottery used as a voting ballot) reportedly drawn by 11 of Ben Yair's group as lots to decide who would commit suicide (Judaism condemns the act) after the rest had been killed.

The ostraca, housed in the museum together with professor

Yigael Yadin's archaeological finds, are inscribed by the same hand and bear nicknames such as 'the hunter', 'the fat man', 'the man from the valley' and 'the cook'. No wonder in the TV series Peter O'Toole exclaims: 'A victory? What have we won? We've won a rock in the middle

of a wasteland, on the shores of a poisoned sea.'

When I explained to Mother that I would be spending a long weekend in Israel, her reaction was quite different from my father's. I recall a series of words including 'bombs', 'terrorists' and 'Jesus' being used and also the

phrase: 'I have only one daughter.' Sadly, until Israel's conflict with the Palestinians is resolved, security and safety continue to be concerns for many people, not just my mother. Nevertheless, I felt surprisingly well looked after. The only traumatising element of my entire trip was the inquisitorial-style questioning by airport security staff in Britain.

The Dead Sea and Masada are closer than I imagined - it takes four hours to fly to Israel from Britain and the sites are a three-hour drive from Tel Aviv.

On the journey from Tel Aviv, past parched, crumbly hills and date plantations arrayed like infantry soldiers, lies Jerusalem. From the Mount of Olives, the old city sprawls open and all eyes are drawn to its magnificent metallic golden dome. The Dome of the Rock is where Muslims believe the Prophet

WHEN I paddle back to shore, I head for a mud wrap in the spa at my hotel, the Isrotel Dead Sea. To appreciate fully the skin-cleansing, tension-relieving and circulation-boosting properties of the slimy mud, I lie mummified in sweat-inducing Cellophane and woolly blankets. After a vigorous hose down and a massage, all that remains of my worries are my muddy footprints on the floor to the shower.

Located in the saddle of the Syrian-African rift, the Dead Sea lies 1,370ft below sea level and is the only place in the world that combines year-round warm weather, a high oxygen content due to the high barometric atmosphere, dry, pollen-free air, weakened ultraviolet radiation, mineral-rich sea, muds and hot springs.

It is said that stays in the Dead Sea are particularly recommended for those with hypertension, dermatological conditions including eczema and psoriasis, and respiratory, rheumatic and arthritic ailments.

My granny would have loved it.

LATE DEALS OF THE WEEK

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A 14-NIGHT stay at the four-star Mercure Playa de Oro in Cuba costs from just £599, departing from Gatwick on November 19. Call First Choice on 0871 664 9011, www.firstchoice.co.uk.

November 26. Prices start at £55 per person including breakfast. Visit www.hotelconnect.co.uk or call 0845 230 8888.

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A TWO-NIGHT stay in Rome costs from £122 staying B&B at the three-star Hotel Flaminio. It is in a leafy suburb but within easy reach of public transport. The deal includes return flights from Gatwick departing December 4. Call Opodo on 0871 277 0090, www.opodo.co.uk.

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