

JORDAN

HISTORY AND HOSPITALITY ON THE DEAD SEA

Written and photographed by Mostafa Ismail

Although Egyptian travelers often go west for their travels, there are countless must-see gems in the region, and one of them is nearby Jordan. Less than an hour away by plane, Jordan offers visitors hospitality, history, and a young, vibrant spirit all in one.

I've been to Jordan about three times now – well, technically twice, because I was deported once due to my name mistakenly being listed as a security threat (or so I was told). Needless to say, my experience with Jordan was quite lively the two times that I did manage to make it.

Jordan is like a miniature, Europeanized Egypt; although all the street signs are in Arabic, the infrastructure is well developed and the streets are clean. The south of Jordan is mostly mountainous and green, while the landscape in the north is more desert; in both regions, it gets cold enough to snow in the winter. Although Jordan is a small country, it is full of ancient sites and young, modern spaces that require a lot of time to explore and discover.

I kicked off the journey with my travel buddy Monica as part of the staff at a Social Entrepreneurship and Idea Generating Conference Gather+962, which was hosted at the Dead Sea Mövenpick Resort and Spa. Believe me when I tell you that there's no better place to start than at the lowest point on Earth – 429 meters below sea level, which is where the resort is located directly on the Dead Sea. The Dead Sea is a regenerating and refreshing body of water; the saltiest sea in the world and rich in minerals, it is an attractive spot for those who are looking to treat their bodies to a natural spa experience – especially because the weather and atmosphere there is warm and peaceful. Although February is a cold winter month



The Hercules Temple at the Amman Citadel

An aerial view of Amman from the Citadel



in many places, it is actually a warm spring experience at the Dead Sea. As far as the stories go, most of them are true: nothing lives in the Dead Sea and nothing sinks – everything floats. If you can't swim, the Dead Sea will make you feel like an Olympic swimmer, just make sure you don't get water in your eyes, ears or mouth, as the salt will burn.

The best way to experience the Dead Sea is to grab some of its mud, smear your whole body with it, and then relax in the water for 20 minutes; it is very important that you shower right afterwards if you don't want your body to heat up, or if the idea of your swimwear turning into a solid brick-like thing does not appeal to you. Yes, that much salt can be hazardous, so proceed with care.

Accommodation

While the Mövenpick is a really expensive resort, I was lucky enough to stay for free as part of the conference. While there, I had dinner with friends at the Kempinski Hotel, and I can easily say that the Mövenpick has a much more down-to-earth ambience without compromising the five star standards. Made out of simple mud and stone, the rooms are built to look like a village, giving the Mövenpick a village feel, and staff and visitors call it "The Village," though the Mövenpick is not without its charms; the sunset view from the infinity pool is breathtaking. The staff is warm and it is obvious that they're trained to be friendly and helpful. Another plus is that Jordanians love Egyptians, so I always felt more than welcome in Amman.

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After the conference, I had time to continue my adventures in the city, and, since I have friends in Amman, my stay was easy and free. The first time I went there, I stayed at the Canyon Boutique Hotel and the Art Hotel, and both get a five-star rating in my book. Both small hotels, The Canyon is located in a quiet spot outside downtown, while The Art Hotel is in the center of downtown Amman, making them great spaces to stay if you want to roam around the city easily.

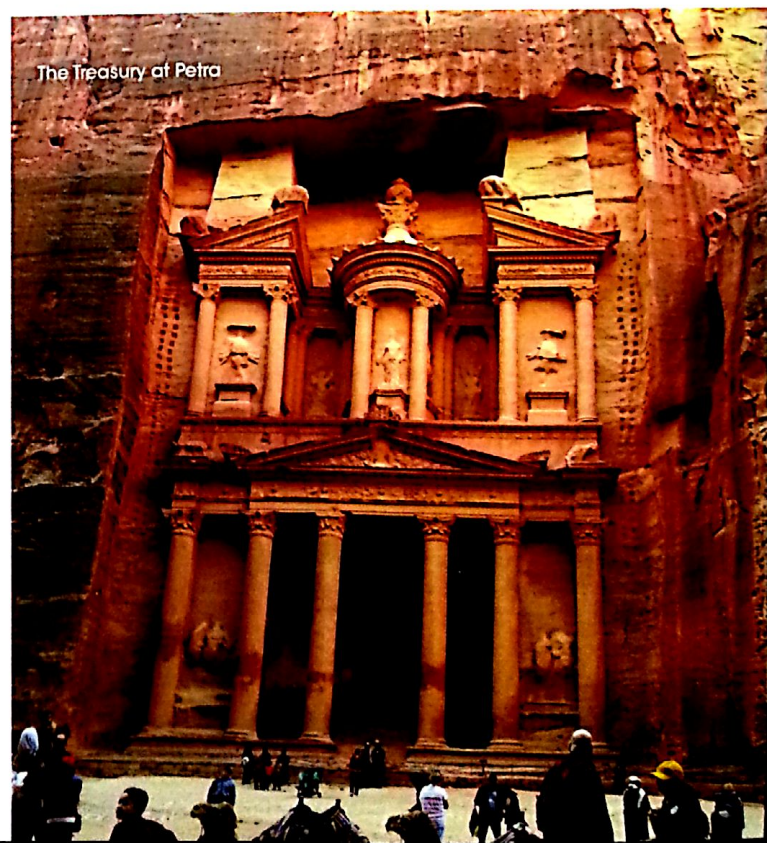
The beauty of Jordan lies not only in the warmth of its people, but also in its geographical terrain. Jordan is a mountainous country, and the capital city and the north of Jordan are built and developed

on mountains, making driving anywhere an exotic journey in itself. The drive from the Dead Sea to Amman made for picturesque scenery, and, due to the difference of the elevation, I could feel my ears pop from the pressure. It was literally a journey from warm spring days to the cold sunny winter weather. Amman is cold, so if you decide to go in the winter make sure you pack accordingly.

Although Amman is a small city, it has a big spirit. As a musician and art-lover, I quickly found myself immersed in its art scene for the rest of my stay. Based out of Amman, I spent my days visiting sites and doing touristy things, and at night, I jumped from music concert to art exhibition to house party in the company of Amman's finest underground artists.

Attractions

On the one hand, the Jordanian Ministry of Antiquities has done a great job of preserving the heritage and monuments that distinguish Jordan. In the heart of Amman is the Citadel, which is located on the highest peak of Amman, "Jabbal Al Qal'aa," and has a 360 view of the city. The Citadel hosts the Temple of Hercules, the Umayyad palace, and a nice little museum with Roman, Byzantine, and Umayyad antiquities. It is also a great spot to have a picnic and enjoy a stunning view of the sunset.



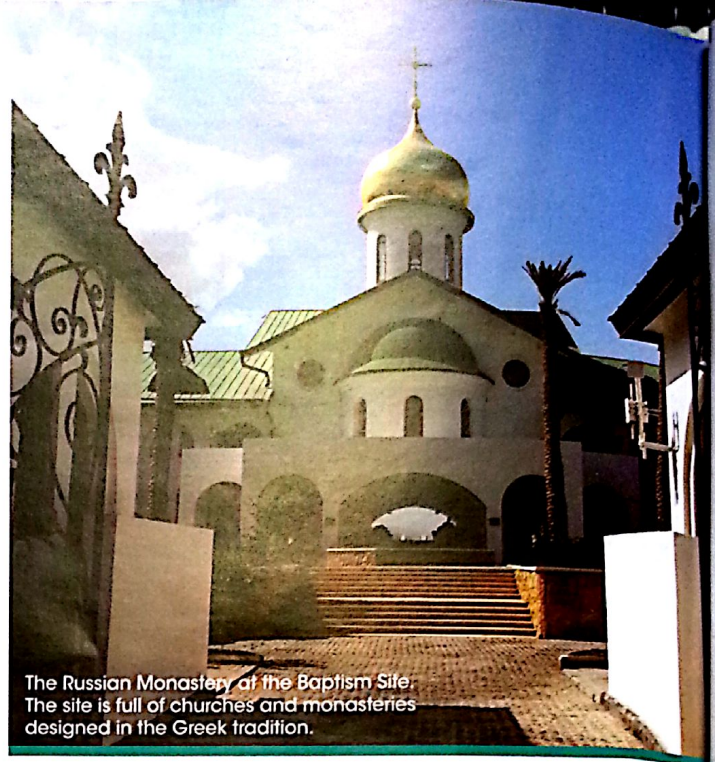
The Treasury at Petra

Travel

If you think the pyramids are a great attraction, then I recommend visiting Petra, which is also known as The Rose City. About two and a half hours north of Amman, Petra is one of the most beautiful ancient monuments I've yet to encounter, and the journey there is scenic and mesmerizing. After arriving at Petra, we had to walk for about an hour to go into the actual city. The ruins are awe-inspiring, and I was eager to understand how they were built, as the precision of the architecture carved out of the mountains is truly magical. There are a few trails to follow in Petra, but the one that we took leads to the monastery, which is 12 kilometers deep into the city's mountains. The trail is paved with about 950 steps going up a valley in between the mountains; we took this trail at sunset, and right before we reached the top, we saw the sun suspended between the two mountains. The view of Petra from the top and the monastery are both breath-taking.

To cover the whole area and truly experience Petra, you should spend at least a couple of days there, but we only had a few hours – yet our experience was definitely worth the drive. Right in between Amman and Petra there is a town called Karak, which is home to a large citadel built by Salah Al-Din; unfortunately we did not get to see it even though it is considered a must-see in the area.

One of the most interesting spots I visited was the Baptism Site by the Jordan River, and I would say that it is one of the intriguing places I have visited anywhere in the world. It is said that this spot is where baby Jesus was baptized, and it is full of churches and



The Russian Monastery at the Baptism Site. The site is full of churches and monasteries designed in the Greek tradition.

Nightlife and Dining

Amman's nightlife was quite the exuberant experience even though everything closes quite early. Unlike Cairo's late night lifestyle, Amman indulges in short nights out and full-power after parties. For drinkers, Amman's selection of alcohol is very diverse, and Jordanian wine is quite delicious and served as a great nightlife companion. One of my favorite places to dine and wine in Amman is Dunya Bar and lounge at the entrance to Rainbow Street, which is one of the liveliest and most colorful streets. Dunya Lounge has a great view overlooking the entrance to Rainbow Street, and they play old Arabic music, including classics by Um Kalthoum, Fayrouz, and Abdel Halim, and the food is delicious. Their selection of shisha, is one of the main attractions here.

If you want to enjoy a morning coffee and a good read, Wild Jordan is a perfect little spot located on a hill overlooking downtown and the Citadel. A donation by USAID to Jordan's natural reserve funds, Wild Jordan has a small shop that displays heritage souvenirs in addition to a study area /café and a restaurant serving delicious food.

One of my favorite places in Amman to have breakfast or a small snack was Hashem Restaurant in downtown, which only serves falafel, foul, and hummus. The food is a must-try, and what better



The inside of the Russian Monastery

monasteries designed in the Greek tradition.

Since the Jordan River is a small current that flows south and separates the Jordanian border from the Israeli border, you can see and hear Israeli tourists visiting the same spot on the other side standing at the baptism site, yet you cannot cross. It was quite a wondrous experience standing across from another country knowing that, to cross this little bit of land, I'd have to go through a big hassle. It also made me think: what do borders mean, and who created them? I was in awe.

Jordan's magnificence is not just about its monuments, and the little villages that dot the countryside in the north give an impression of what Jordan is like today. An hour south of Amman is a beautiful little town called Jarash populated by farmers and Bedouins; its mountainous roads and fascinating greenery make it ideal for a sunset picnic.





The Baptism Site by the Jordan River is said to be the place where Jesus was baptized and is one of the most intriguing spots in Jordan.

to follow a meal than some local dessert; a five-minute walk from Hashem's is Habeeba, home of the best konafa in town, with only three choices of konafa: soft, hard or finger konafa.

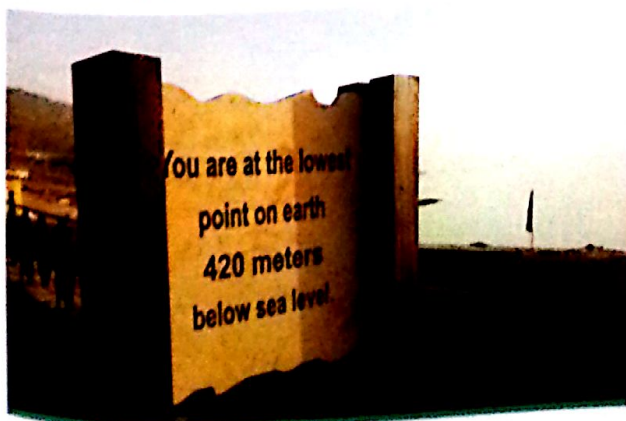
With everything that I saw, I have to say that what I enjoyed most about Jordan's nightlife was the live music. While I was there, I went to three concerts and enjoyed them all. One was at a bar called Trader Vics, where I enjoyed an evening of listening to a local cover band called The Chameleons. The music was epic and the drinks were strong, and, as we enjoyed our time dancing the night away, everybody on the dance floor eventually became friends. Playing the "I am from Egypt" card always helps to start a conversation in Jordan, and it was especially useful during these nights out. The following night I went to hear one of Jordan's most popular reggae bands, Mellow Yellow who rocked the stage with their bouncy music at the Blue Fig, and we enjoyed a vigorous dinner while enjoying their bouncy music.

My favorite night in Amman was at Salute Bar, where a Lebanese band called Post Cards inspired our night away, and Salute Bar wouldn't have been the same without them. They mesmerized the audience with their made-with-love music, natural chemistry, and explosive stage presence, making for an exceptional experience.

Shopping

Shopping in Jordan is not very exciting, but there were a few places here and there that stood out. Since I was interested mainly in

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herbs and little souvenirs, I found a few little places that gave me exactly that. One of the shops was called "Al Saqr Herb Shop;" ironically, most of the products there are made in Egypt, although I have rarely seen them here. The other souvenir shop was called "El Afghani," and even though it appears to be a small shop, it was full of beautiful souvenirs that speak of Jordanian heritage.

It goes without saying that Dead Sea product shops are scattered all around Amman and make for good souvenirs, but if you're visiting, the real experience of the Dead Sea beats any product!

Gentle Touches

The best experiences that I had came from generous people who, at the most unexpected of times, gave me gifts and hospitality. For three days in a row, my Egyptian travel buddy and I received free food or drinks in one place or another. While having breakfast one day at Hashem's, we ended up sharing a table with a beautiful mother and son because of how crowded the restaurant was. The mother initiated a conversation with us about Egypt, and told us how she'd love to visit, and then decided to pay for our meal. We couldn't thank her enough!

On another occasion, after watching the moonrise in the town of Jarash, I went back to Amman with some friends to try the organic grass-fed beef burger at Burger Shack. Coincidentally, the owner was a man I had met in Sinai, and we instantly remembered each other and recollected our common friends. With a warm welcome, he treated the four of us to great burgers and a mouthwatering homemade cookies topped with homemade soft ice-cream dessert.

Another time, on our way back from Petra, we got lost in the suburbs of Amman as we were driving out to a restaurant to have dinner with friends. By the time we found our way back, it was late and two of the restaurants we had planned to dine in had closed, so we opted to buy some wine and cheese and enjoy our last night on the veranda at our gracious hosts' apartment. We found a small shop called "Masraweya Shops;" curious about the name, I started a conversation with the owner, and after a long warm one, he tried to sell us a bottle of expensive French wine. Priced at 54 dinars, (EGP 540), we decided that it was not worth the money and to buy Jordanian wine instead. The shop owner was so keen on us having the French wine that he gave it to us for free. Flattered, we couldn't turn it down, and after just one glass, we decided that this was the best possible ending that Jordan could offer us. □

The view of the sunset from the Mövenpick's infinity pool, which aligns perfectly with the Dead Sea.

