



STOPOVER TO SHOPOVER

Adriaane Pielou finds that Amman has become a vital destination in its own right

Anyone who last visited Amman a decade or so ago will be amazed at its evolution. The Jordanian capital is now a destination in its own right, with shopping firmly on the list of things to do among the Middle Eastern visitors who are increasingly piling in at weekends. For years, the city served more as somewhere to spend the first night on a trip to Petra, two-and-a-half hours south of Amman, and whose description by a 19th-century English dean as “the rose red city half as old as time” has to be one of the all-time most powerful inducements to travel. Yet Petra, carved into the mountains about 2,300 years ago, is only one of the ancient sites – Greek, Nabataean, Roman, Mamluk and Ottoman – that make this crossroads of the ancient world such a compelling historic destination. Amman, too, has its share of impressive historic remains, primarily the hilltop Roman Citadel, with its broken-pillared Temple of Hercules and adjoining Ottoman-era Ummayyad palace. But it's only recently become worth lingering in for more than sightseeing, or as a stop en route to Petra or Aqaba, which is rapidly becoming spa central.

The thrillingly old in Amman now stands alongside the impressively new

as the Hashemite kingdom's capital undergoes the kind of building boom it last saw 2,000 years ago, when the Romans were sweating over their Citadel. As the population has expanded to more than four million, the city has grown from a dusty sprawl spread across seven or eight hillside to an urban expanse now extending across 21 hills. Once dusty roads have been paved. Punctuating the uniformity of the old two-storey or three-storey sandstone buildings, the new neighbourhoods of glass and steel towers would look at home in Abu Dhabi or Dubai.

Along with this transformation has come an explosion of malls. Most are fairly basic, but the best, The Boulevard, the city's pride and joy, opened in 2014, although it's still surrounded by cranes as a new business district goes up. It's a showcase for international design names, anchored by an Aston Martin showroom. And a particularly welcome change for visitors is the huge improvement in places to stay. More than 25 five-star hotels are planned to open in the next five years.

Grandest so far is the Fairmont Amman. Two minutes' walk from The Boulevard, a typically cool outpost of

Marriott's W brand also formally opened in April this year, with a rooftop pool and lounging area providing a welcome spot to retire to after a long day of shopping and sightseeing. And who knows what new luxuries the Ritz-Carlton and St Regis, currently nearing completion across the street from the Fairmont, will bring, or what hotelier Gordon 'I want to make Amman sexy' Campbell Gray of London and Beirut hot-spot fame will unveil next year?

With a dozen or more new routes planned for Queen Alia International Airport, there's no escaping the sense that a tourist boom looms for Amman.

NUTS, SPICES AND MORE: BROWSING THE CITY'S OLD BAZAARS

Whereas north, east and south Amman remain low-rise residential areas, prosperous West Amman is the area that most visitors will want to explore, its districts demarcated by eight traffic junctions known as “circles”. The chaotic, grubby, ever-busy heart of Amman, Wasat Al Balad, or “centre of the nation”, as Downtown is known, is packed with browsing, shopping, bustling humanity and is the best area to experience authentic Amman before one seeks



Clockwise from far left, construction in Amman is currently booming; Suffra Restaurant is a dining highlight in the city; the Jordan River Foundation sells curios, also inset, for good causes; the new Fairmont hotel; the market in Downtown Amman Alamy; Jordan River Foundation; Fairmont Amman



the relative peace and quiet of the more internationally oriented areas. Near the ancient Roman theatre and splendidly curated Jordan Museum – which opened in 2009 and whose knockout exhibits include some of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Neolithic Ain Ghazal statues, the oldest human figures ever excavated anywhere – the lofty

covered food market anchors the area. Not only an essential photo opportunity, and with metal cages of live ducks and chickens to dodge at the entrances, it makes a fragrant, potentially atmospheric place to stock up from old-fashioned wooden tubs of nuts and spices, pistachios, dried apricots, and local Medjool dates at the equivalent of Dh25 to Dh40 per kilo. Outside, you can wander busy, hooting streets where cubicle-sized barber shops and juice sellers dispensing fresh sugar-cane juice flank smoky old cafes and stores crammed with gold jewellery, copper pans and coffee-pots.

TRADITIONAL HANDICRAFTS

Tourist central, Rainbow Street is a long and always lively street that has evolved from being merely a central spot for backpackers to congregate. Cafes and ice-cream parlours now flank clothing, homewares and jewellery boutiques. Near the delectably shabby-chic Suffra

Restaurant, set up in one of the loveliest 1920s/30s villas whose gardens fringe the street, another old villa houses the shop run by the Jordan River Foundation (jordanriver.jo). This is one of several outlets founded by Queen Rania to train, and then sell the work of, impoverished women living in the remote, poorest reaches of Jordan. Happily, its organisers have clearly taken advice and direction on what sophisticated visitors might really want to buy: natural materials and traditional designs predominate. Appealing items fill the shelves: printed cushion covers, stuffed toy camels, little tables, baskets made from reeds and banana leaves that were once thrown away and burnt, black goat-hair Bedouin rugs, thick woollen kilims, kohls containers, candlesticks. It's a shame, though, that the prices have been set so high. Some verge on the self-defeating – Dh500 to Dh1,000 dinars for printed cushion covers, for instance. For the unique Bani Hamida folk art-style Bedouin embroidered or woven wall hangings, however, Dh1,200 or more seems well worth paying.

Nearby, at the Trinitae Soap House, another atmospheric, slightly crumbling villa, the fragrance of beautiful locally

the smart shopper



► made Trinitae soaps, body oils and candles wafts enticingly on the breeze. Inside, you can find the likes of triple-milled pomegranate, rose or vetiver bath soaps at Dh17 and orange-blossom diffusers at Dh65. Five minutes' walk away, the large, light-filled shop at the Wild Jordan Foundation, which also organises adventure travel trips along the 650-kilometre-long Jordan Trail, sells an enticing, eclectic range of Jordanian goods: cold-pressed Sitti soaps made by Palestinian refugees, olive oils, wooden honey-dippers (Dh47), wooden coasters (Dh85 for four), wooden bowls (Dh125), jams, stuffed dates, children's toys and Dead Sea mud facepacks.

INTERNATIONAL BRAND NAMES

With the air dusty and full of the sound of construction, Al Abdali is undergoing a humongous transformation as it turns from being the site of an army camp to the hub of Amman's luxury shopping and the site of a new financial district. Not all stores along the smart new open-air shopping and restaurant mall that is The Boulevard have been let yet, but the area could still easily occupy a visitor for half a day or more, especially a peckish one given to interspersing casual browsing in Hackett, Zara or the indoor Abdali Mall

at the end of The Boulevard, with stops for coffee and cake. Local brands among the international names include Jordanian homewares company In Doi (in-doi.com), with arty vases, candle-holders and Zen gardens from about Dh55.

JEWELLERY

Besides Al Abdali, upmarket Abdoun – home to the Fairmont and soon-to-open Ritz-Carlton and St Regis – is where a number of the best jewellery boutiques can be found, some in hotel arcades, others as stand-alone stores, but all home to talented local designers working in gold and gemstones and mixing traditional Arab and international aesthetics. Working with 18-karat gold, Nadia Dajani (nadiadajani.com) has developed an international following, not just for her fine work, but also for a social conscience that has manifested itself in a training programme that has turned unskilled enthusiasts into accomplished artisans. Her calligraphic or Roman-replica hoop earrings cost from US\$125 (Dh459). Le-thbridge Designs has delicate bracelets from \$175 (Dh642), and Lama Hourani (lamahourani.com) – a designer whose family launched Foresight32, Jordan's first private art gallery – has also found a global following, partly thanks to

an efficient website, with prices from about \$120 (Dh441) to more than \$1,000 (Dh3,673).

FASHION AND ART

In addition to its boutique at the Landmark Hotel in Amman, SEP Jordan's (sep-jordan.com) beautiful shawls, shirts and home decor items, many handstitched by some of the thousands of refugee women whom Jordan supports, are also to be found in London at Harrods in London. A thickly hand-embroidered cushion cover costs about Dh430. On The Boulevard, Heba's Closet stocks locally designed and stitched clothing – embroidered long dresses cost from about Dh330. The Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts has a shop well-stocked with handmade or simple items including shawls from Dh250. And at the city's fledgling galleries and art festivals, there is some enthralling work to be found – at snatch-up prices, too. Cartoonist-artist Mike V Derderian, whose work is Aubrey Beardsley meets Japanese manga, is a standout star; Omar Momani, Rafik Majzoub, Hiba Wasef, Maya Assad and Khalid Al Nahar are all also worth investigating.

HANDICRAFT VILLAGES

Many tourists making the seemingly



mandatory minibus stop en route to Petra at many handicraft villages will find themselves met by sour-faced, aggressive salesmen pushing \$13,000 (Dh47,751) for a four-piece mother-of-pearl studded sofa, table and armchair sets, painted ostrich eggs and other unlikely impulse buys. But the Iraq Al-Amir village, a 25-minute taxi ride outside Amman, in a green area fed by streams and natural springs and with a palace and caves to visit, too, is different. One of Queen Noor's initiatives to provide training and income for poor

rural women, the Iraq Al-Amir Women Co-operative (iraqalameer.com) sweetly sells items such as clear soaps made of olive oil (Dh12), an appealing new range of blue-and-white bowls, serving dishes and other ceramics resulting from a collaboration with German designers, Tree of Life wall hangings, and greetings cards handmade from paper from locally sourced pampas grass, banana leaves, okra and roses. Woven wool rugs and carpets are also on offer, from about \$190 (Dh698). Hiring a taxi for the day to include a trip here costs about Dh365.

CAFES FOR COFFEE AND KNAFEH

Punctuating the day with a visit to a cafe – for an Dh18 cappuccino or strong, sweet cup of Turkish coffee or mint tea and a slice of cake or some local knafeh – is part of everyday life in Amman. Favourite stops among locals in Downtown include time-honoured haunts such as Habibah – the oldest Arabic sweets shop in the city, founded in 1948, it is perennially popular for the first dinner of Ramadan as well as routinely for knafeh – and Hashem for delectable hummus, falafel and quick meals for less than Dh50. Elsewhere, plenty of stylish new cafes have opened: names to look for, old and new, include the Cafe des Artistes, Peace Cafe, Rumi,

Dimitri's Coffee, Caffe Strada, Mind-Hub, Shams El Balad, Majnoon Qahwa, Al Rashid Court, Afrah, the two Books@Cafe outlets, the Wild Jordan cafe, the tiny Kava Espresso & Brew Bar and the Blue Fig Cafe.

WHERE TO STAY

For a decade, the Four Seasons was the best hotel in town, but since cranes and new high-rises started to punctuate Amman's hilly skyline, it now has several competitors and now it's the Fairmont (fairmont.com/amman), opened earlier this year, that is easily Amman's smartest place to stay – and for wealthy locals to meet for tea or host a wedding party. The pale-marble coffee-shop, the large, intelligently planned, light-filled rooms and the spa's diligent therapists all have immense appeal. Turn-down has been eliminated – but the minibars are some of the least expensive for a five-star hotel anywhere. Double rooms cost from 144 Jordanian dinars (Dh745).

GETTING THERE

Flights from the UAE to Amman (3.5 hours) with Emirates (emirates.com), Etihad (etihad.com), flydubai (flydubai.com) and Royal Jordanian Airlines (rj.com) cost from Dh1,370 return. ■



Clockwise from far left, The Boulevard development is a hub for shopping and dining; knafeh at Habibah, Amman's oldest Arabic sweets shop; Hashem serves quick meals such as hummus and falafel; SEP Jordan sells shawls, shirts and home decor items Alamy; Mahmoud Al Haj