



Temple of Hercules

معبد هرقل

# Amman:

## Jordan's White-Stone Capital

By **Habeeb Salloum**

In every part of Amman, Jordan's bustling capital, white stone buildings edged the streets through which we drove. It was as if we were making our way through a forest of chalky-coloured boulders carved by the hand of man. Ibrahim, our guide who was driving us around and who seemed to be in love with his city remarked: "Are they not beautiful, our homes? I don't think there's another place on earth where all the houses are built from white cut stone."

Often referred to as 'the white city', Amman, like Rome, was originally built on seven hills, but it has now spread to some nineteen hills. As in the past, its buildings' outstanding whiteness, impress most visitors and continue to be the trademark of this rapidly

growing, handsome city.

Amman, known historically in Ammoniate times as Rabbath-Ammon, was also referred to as the 'City of Waters'. Later in the Graeco-Roman era it was called Philadelphia (Friendly City) and was one of the ten cities of the famous Decapolis- located in Jordan, Palestine and Syria. The flourishing capital of Jordan, has been on the highway of civilisation for thousands of years. Ammoniates, Assyrians, ancient Egyptians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Nabataeans, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Crusaders, Ottomans and British, all once, called it home.

Traces of these bygone ages remain in the Citadel, located on a hill high above the

town-centre. These include the Roman Temple of Hercules built by Herod the Great - its regal columns silhouetted against the sky, the elegant capitals of a Byzantine church, and a 7th century Umayyad-Arab palace- both, presently, being renovated by the Spanish. The dome of the Umayyad Palace dominates the ruins - the most impressive in the complex. The grounds are also home to the excellent Jordanian Archaeological Museum housing a fine collection of antiquities - some going back to the dawn of civilization.

Below, at the foot of the Citadel, stands the Roman Forum, Odeon and the renovated 6000-seat Roman theatre - a deep-sided bowl carved into the hill and still used for ➤



Exhibit inside Jordan's Archaeological Museum

معروضة في المتحف الآثاري



Ruins of a Byzantine church, and a 7th century Umayyad-Arab palace

بقايا الكنيسة البيزنطية والقصر الأموي

musical and other entertainment related performances. The theatre is the home of two museums: the Jordan Folkloric Museum, exhibiting the traditional life of the country and the Jordan Museum of Popular Traditions, with a fine collection of

costumes.

Twentieth century Amman, with a population of 2.5 million, is a flourishing administrative and commercial metropolis. It combines the mystique of the past with the best of the modern world. Still rapidly growing, the city

contains 24 four and five star hotels while others are under construction. The government is making strenuous efforts to fill these hotels with tourists, and, is succeeding. In 2005, nearly three million travellers spent at least one night in Jordan. Their spending accounts for 13% of the GNP.

Even though the Arab-Israeli conflict, the mother of all Middle Eastern conflicts, at times, slows the number of visitors, tourism is being encouraged in every way and tourist officials are upbeat. Jordan's numerous attractions will, no doubt, in the future, lure many more visitors.

Not only Amman but the whole country is very safe and offers some of the oldest antiquities in the world. English is widely spoken, the city is clean and, year-round, has a fine-dry and moderate climate. Above all, the Jordanians are wonderfully gracious, helpful and hospitable. When all these attributes are combined, most of the visitors' expectations become a reality or are even surpassed - hence, the optimism for the future of tourism.

The city is a perfect place to base one's tours for exploring Jordan or the neighbouring countries. No more than a five hour drive from anywhere in the country, Amman has many experienced travel agents and tour companies who can accommodate almost any request from demanding visitors.

The city has a wide spectrum of restaurants offering the cuisines of the world, from Arab food, in its many varieties, to international specialties and fast food. The whole city is a sophisticated gourmet world with a dizzying array of savory dishes.

Should a visitor yearn for Western food and entertainment, Amman's affluent Abdoun district is the place for European and North American style cafes with a slight Arab touch. The Sheraton Entertainment Centre with its ultra-modern theatre and shops, the Hard Rock Cafe, Ciro's Pizza Pomodoro of Knightsbridge and many other eating and entertainment spots bring the West to this part of a fast evolving city.

However, for visitors who are looking for the Orient, the ultimate place to buy the epitome of Jordanian handicrafts and, at the same ➤



The Mosque

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time, enjoy Arab food is the Tourist Village of Kan Zaman (once upon a time) - just outside Amman. Once an Ottoman property, it dates back to the turn of the century. The estate has been transformed into a handicraft and restaurant complex - for visitors an enchanted oasis where centuries-old Arab hospitality lives on. The village's reputation has not diminished throughout the years. A traveller who enters through its stone doorway is always considered an honoured guest.

Inside, cobbled streets and courtyards all lead to the interesting and exciting traditional Jordanian life of the past. Small fascinating shops at Arti Zaman (the Craftsman Souk) offer a wide variety of traditional artisan products where visitors can watch glassblowing and woodcarving in traditional workshops, stop in a street cafe or sample the ever-popular *mankoushei* (Arab type pizza) at the *makhbaz* (bakery).

However, for us, the village's vaulted ceiling restaurant, serving authentic Arabic cuisine was the place to be. Amid the atmosphere of Arabic music, we had an excellent Arab meal. It was an exciting culmination to the sights, sounds and tastes of Jordanian history wrapped in the cloak of the 20th century - an unforgettable finale to our visit to Jordan's white-stone capital.

### IF YOU GO Facts about Jordan

- 1) Tourist visas are easily available at any entry point into Jordan except at the King Hussein Bridge. These are single entry visas at a cost of 10 JD. Groups of five persons or more arriving by way of a designated Jordanian tour operator are exempted from all visa charges.
- 2) The U.S. dollar is equal to about 70 cents to the JD (Jordanian Dinar); Canadian dollar about 60 to 1 JD. Exchange cash or travelers cheques at the money changers - they do not take commission.
- 3) The usual price to rent a reasonably modern small car with full insurance is around 30 or 35 (JD) per day. The roads are good - gas costs .60 JD per litre. Jordan is a small country. Taxis are reasonably priced and are one of the most convenient methods of transportation. However, agree to the fare beforehand. If the taxi is metered add 200 fils tip to the price shown on the metre.
- 4) Modern medical services are readily available in Jordan's larger cities and towns and the larger hotels normally have a doctor on call. Most doctors speak English fluently. Emergency medical treatment for cases not needing hospitalization is free in Jordan.
- 5) There are many Internet cafés all around

the country – even in remote places.

6) Jordan is a very safe and friendly country in which to travel. Most Jordanians speak English and are very hospitable to strangers.

7) Conservative dress is advised for both men and women. Women will feel more comfortable when traveling in the country if they dress modestly - no leggings, mini skirts, shorts or sleeveless tops.

8) Besides mezzah and an endless series of appetizers, and the other usual Middle Eastern dishes, try the local Jordanian dishes of *mansaf* (lamb, rice and yogurt sauce) and *musakhkhan* (chicken, onion and pine nut dish).

9) For handicrafts, shop at Amman's downtown souk or Kan Zaman Tourist Village. Items to buy are: coloured sand bottles, cross-stitch embroidery, Madaba rugs, olive wood and mother-of-pearl articles, pottery and glassware, and silver Bedouin jewellery.

10) Culture is thriving in Jordan. Artists are rapidly developing the fine arts scene. There are so many exhibits and openings in Amman covered by the English newspaper, The Jordan Times, on a daily basis. There are at least a half dozen galleries in the city and a Cultural Centre. Topping all the cultural events is the folkloric Jerash Festival, held in summer in the nearby city of Jerash.

11) Departure taxes for non-Jordanians are 10 JD at the airport and 5 JD at other crossings.

12) For those in North America who would like to see a little of Jordan without travelling to that country, they can visit Ottawa, capital of Canada and see the excellent Jordan Petra Exhibition at the Canadian Museum of Civilization – running from April 7, 2006 to January 2, 2007.

Note: All prices quoted are in Jordanian Dinar (JD)

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