

November 22, 2009

NEXT STOP

## **A Newly Stylish Amman Asserts Itself**

By ANDREW FERREN

“AREN’T you going to check out the terrace?” Madian al-Jazerah said to me.

It was just after sunset on a summer Thursday evening, and we were standing on the sprawling front deck of Books@Cafe, the combination bookstore, cafe and restaurant that Mr. Jazerah owns in the historic neighborhood of [Jabal Amman](#) in [Jordan](#)’s capital.

“I thought we were on it,” I replied.

Wordlessly he pointed to a door at the back of the cafe, set in a renovated villa just off Rainbow Street. Soon I was making my way through a series of cavernous rooms, all seemingly decorated in the year 1972 with orange, yellow and brown optic stripes or Pop Art flower motifs.

As it turns out, the real terrace was about five times the size of the front deck and populated with about 20 times as many chic young Jordanians lounging under the darkening sky. Giant red lanterns bobbed in the breeze and a sea of tables spread out beneath a canopy of pines. Waiters shuttled cocktails and coffees and tended to the “hubbly bubblies” — nargiles, or water pipes with flavored tobacco — that were being summoned to the tables as the evening wore on.

The moment was an apt metaphor for Amman: if you like what you first see, look a little further and you might get more.

Sadly, many visitors don’t bother to look for much at all. With a host of natural marvels like the Dead Sea and the desert of Wadi Rum, certified wonders of the world like [Petra](#) and biblical sites galore, the country’s bustling capital, home to somewhat more than two million residents, is often overlooked.

But treat Amman as a mere way station between destinations and you miss discovering what is perhaps the most pleasant city in the [Middle East](#). Calling a place “pleasant” may seem like faint praise, but in Amman pleasant covers

areas like religious tolerance, personal safety, an agreeable climate (at more than 3,000 feet above sea level, Amman is delightful spring, summer and fall) and the availability of French Champagne and excellent sushi. In this strife-torn region, pleasant is no small shakes.

Now, with an influx of wealthy immigrants from Iraq and other Persian Gulf countries and the return of Jordanian expats, it seems the Champagne is just starting to flow. The city's culinary scene has expanded from its famous shwarma stands and falafel joints (though thankfully the best of these remain) to embrace a host of swank Asian fusion restaurants, intimate French bistros and authentic Italian trattorias. The night-life scene evolves so quickly that hot spots open and close almost before their fabulousness can make it into print in magazines or guidebooks.

“A lot of Jordanians go abroad to study in [Europe](#), the U.K., U.S. and [Canada](#),” said Fadi Jaber, a Jordanian who went to boarding school and college in the [United States](#). “When they come back, they want to recreate the lifestyle they enjoyed abroad. The places now opening would be right at home in [London](#) or New York or [Montreal](#) because that's where these kids hung out.”

Mr. Jaber should know. His American-style bakery [Sugar Daddy's](#), which opened in 2006, has become a Middle East phenomenon, expanding to Beirut and [Dubai](#).

For one of the world's oldest cities, Amman is surprisingly modern. After millennia of being inhabited by Ammonites, Assyrians, Nabateans, Romans, Umayyads and Ottomans, the city was virtually deserted except for Bedouin nomads in the 1800s. Revitalization came with the railroad that passed through Amman on the route linking Damascus and Mecca. But the city really took shape between the 1920s and 1940s as the Kingdom of Jordan became an independent country with Amman as its capital.

So with an architectural legacy that is more Bauhaus than Byzantine, Amman is delightfully unencumbered by the weight of history.

Modern-day Ammanis tend to rank ancient monuments well below air-conditioned cineplexes on their lists of favorite leisure activities. The 6,000-seat Roman theater shares its downtown site with two faded but charming museums displaying Ottoman and Bedouin folk customs. The Archeology

Museum in the Citadel is like an Indiana Jones field station, with handwritten labels and portable brass display cabinets.

“You know, visitors mention those museums, but I don’t think people from here ever go to them,” said Rima Mallalah, an artist who runs an offbeat gallery called Love on a Bike.

Ammanis prefer contemporary Jordanian and Arab culture shown at places like Darat al-Funun, a complex of several villas that have been converted into galleries and is run by the charitable Khalid Shoman Foundation. Cutting-edge video installations, photography displays, outdoor films and live performances draw the city’s cultured set.

Spread out over seven hills (the greater Amman area now covers nearly 20), it’s not a walking city but taxis are abundant, inexpensive and will take you almost anywhere — even to Petra, about three hours away — for a negotiated price.

Most of the action is in West Amman, and more important than the seven hills are the eight circles — huge traffic roundabouts that stretch along Zahran Street, the principal east-west artery, and serve as landmarks or virtual addresses for anything near them.

Rainbow Street, just off First Circle, is the nexus of urban cool with art galleries, cafes and the fun Friday flea market called Jara Souk. Nearby is Wild Jordan, the showroom and lively cafe of the Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature, selling products like olive oil soap and silver jewelry made (mostly by women) on the society’s nature reserves.

On your first night in town, Ammanis will send you to Fakhr el-Din to sample a nearly encyclopedic menu of Levantine cuisine. Cross the street for a nightcap in the [garden](#) at Grappa, an Italian restaurant in what at first seems to be a private villa, until you discover that spilling down the hillside in the same building are two clubs, Salute and Beer Garden, with dancing and shots being poured in abundance. The upside of the city’s hilly topography and sugar-cube [architecture](#) are the myriad roof terraces with wide-open vistas.

On your second night, Ammanis will start talking sushi. With an elegantly sleek décor and (surprise) huge terrace, the new pan-Asian Yoshi has been a

hot spot, serving updated versions of classics like crab Rangoon alongside the futomaki and other artfully prepared sushi.

Abdoun Circle (not one of the eight) is the heart of the city's thriving night life where the chicest clubs maintain a strict "couples only" policy, meaning no unescorted men. One of the trendiest clubs of the moment is Flow, which puts some extra groove on its dance floor with a mix of hip-hop and R&B. The busiest nights are Thursdays and don't bother going before midnight.

Daytime fun, especially if you brought the children, can be found at the King Hussein Park where the late king's impressive car collection is on view, ranging from sleek Ferraris to the armored Rolls-Royce Silver Ghost used by Lawrence of Arabia. Next door, the Children's Museum has flight simulators and a sandbox filled with mock archaeological finds. (Both attractions are open on Fridays — a day of rest in mostly Muslim Jordan — when many other sites are not.)

These days Amman itself is a bit like a sandbox. As Mr. Jazerah of Books@Cafe points out: "If you're willing to dig around and let this city surprise you, it will."

SHWARMA, YES, BUT SUSHI TOO

HOW TO GET THERE

Delta offers nonstop service from [Kennedy airport](#) in New York to Queen Alia International Airport in [Amman](#) for about \$1,000. Royal Jordanian also offers nonstop service. Continental flies from Newark with a connection through [London](#). European carriers like Iberia and Air France have connecting flights through their hub cities. An entry visa is required for [United States](#) citizens visiting [Jordan](#) and can be acquired at a cost of 10 Jordanian dinars (\$14.30 at \$1.43 to the dinar) either upon arrival at the airport or another point of entry or in advance at a Jordanian consulate.

WHERE TO EAT AND DRINK

The atmosphere at most trendy Jordanian restaurants is casual, and the portions — especially at establishments serving Levantine food — are abundant.

Fakhr el-Din (Taha Hussein Street, Second Circle, Jabal Amman; 962-6-465-2399; [www.fakhreldin.com](http://www.fakhreldin.com)).

Grappa (Taha Hussein Street, Second Circle, Jabal Amman; 962-6-463-8212).

Yoshi (Mithqal Al Fayez Street, Third Circle, Jabal Amman; 962-6-464-0903; [www.yoshi-jo.com](http://www.yoshi-jo.com)).

Books@Cafe (Omar Ibn al-Khattab Street 12, First Circle, Jabal Amman; 962-6-465-0457; [booksatcafe.com](http://booksatcafe.com)).

Sugar Daddy's (Fawzi al-Mughrabi Street, Abdoun Kurdi Plaza, Abdoun; 962-6-593-3032; [www.sugardaddysbakery.com](http://www.sugardaddysbakery.com)).

Flow (Mazen Seedo al-Kurdi Street; 962-79-978-7777).

## WHERE TO STAY

Boutique hotels have yet to land in Amman but many of the large chain hotels have ramped up design elements and offer lively lobby lounges.

Grand Hyatt Amman (Hussein Bin Ali Street, Fourth Circle, Jabal Amman; 962-6-465-1234; [www.amman.grand.hyatt.com](http://www.amman.grand.hyatt.com)) has comfy if corporate-feeling rooms, and the lobby is buzzing all day and night. Doubles start at 160 dinars.

The Four Seasons Amman (Al Kindi Street, Fifth Circle, Jabal Amman; 962-6-550-5555; [www.fourseason.com/amman](http://www.fourseason.com/amman)) trades a lower-key lobby scene for increased luxury in plushly furnished and airy rooms. Doubles from 230 dinars.

## WHAT TO DO

Darat al-Funun (al-Saadi Street, Paris Circle, Jabal Webdeh; 962-6-464-3251; [www.daratafunun.org](http://www.daratafunun.org)).

Wild Jordan (Othman Bin Affan Street; 962-6-461-6523; [www.rscn.org.jo](http://www.rscn.org.jo)).

Royal Automobile Museum (Saeed Khair Street, King Hussein Park; 962-6-541-1392; [www.royalautomuseum.jo](http://www.royalautomuseum.jo)).

Children's Museum (Saeed Khair Street, King Hussein Park; 962-6-541-1479; [www.cmj.jo](http://www.cmj.jo)).

Love on a Bike (Muaath Bin Jabal Street, First Circle, Jabal Amman; [www.loveonabike.com](http://www.loveonabike.com)).

Jara Souk Friday market ([www.jara-jordan.com](http://www.jara-jordan.com)).

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: December 6, 2009

An article on Nov. 22 about Amman, Jordan, misidentified the third establishment that shares a building with Grappa and Salute on Taha Hussein Street in the Jabal Amman district. It is called Beer Garden, not Canvas. (Though owned by the same group as Grappa and Salute, Canvas is located across town in the Jabal al-Weibdeh district.)