A walk around Al-Balad Downtown Amman

To get to the heart of Amman it is imperative to explore Al-Balad, the historic downtown that lies in the wadi (valley) created by the ancient Sayl Amman (Amman River). Ammanis are welcoming people, and they are happy to have you explore this vibrant core of their home and workplace. Take the pulse of the city as you follow this walk through the souqs (markets), shops, restaurants and historical sites of al-Balad. Taste the city, feel its energy, meet its people, and enjoy the experience of al-Balad. Ahlan wa sahlan, a Jordanian welcome you will hear often says “you are part of the family, and there are no hills between us!”

Amman in history

Amman is both an ancient city and a modern urban metropolis. In its wide valley floor, which was once fed by a regular flowing river, inhabitants of the oasis planted crops and hosted long distance trade arriving from the north, west and south. The history of the area now known as al-Balad can be traced back through the millennia and it was inhabited at least as far back as 6,700 BC. Tomb and temple remains from the Middle Bronze Age (1700 BC) indicate on-going habitation of the floor of the wadi. The Ammonite city-state, centered around Rabbath-Ammon in what is now al-Balad, emerged after 1200 BC. As you stand in the midst of downtown and look around you, it is clear why the Ammonites built a ring of fortresses on the mountain tops (jabal) around their valley home to protect it from surprise attack.

Looking up from al-Balad the domineering acropolis on top of Jabal Qala’a (the Citadel), which served as the holy site for worship and sacrifice for the people of the city for more than 2,000 years, can be seen. Stairs linked the downtown area with the acropolis, so that worshippers could easily ascend to the temple complex. Today Amman still offers visitors a unique horizontal and vertical landscape, with its hilltops and wadis (valleys) connected by stairs – a unique feature you will notice throughout this part of the city, and which remains to this day a key feature within the communities.

During Hellenic, Nabataean and Roman times, what is now al-Balad was the site of a thriving oasis trading city known as Philadelphia (City of Brotherly Love). It was part of the Roman Decapolis city network where traders, acting troops and soldiers passed through the oasis on their way to the cities in the west or north to Damascus. Under the Byzantines and then the Umayyads the city expanded to cover much of the valley floor, with regional bureaucrats ruling from the heights of the acropolis overlooking it.

From the 12th to around the 17th century, however, the city slowly dwindled and died as trade routes and imperial attention shifted elsewhere.

Modern Amman

In the 19th century modern Amman sprang, phoenix-like, from the scattered ruins around the valley floor. In 1878 Circassian refugees from Russian military advances in the Caucasus were resettled amid the ruins of al-Balad, thus starting the setting of numerous refugee arrivals. Mud dwellings were built and by 1905 when the great Hijaz Railway was being constructed many found work building or protecting the new rail link. Amman hosted a station on the line from 1904, and by 1909 the town was large enough (3,000 people) to have its first mayor and municipal council.

The Ottomans built an army base here, and during WWI it became a hub for communications. Overlooking al-Balad, on Jabal al-Ashrafiyyeh, near to where the distinctive black and white Abu Darwish Mosque now stands, Australian and British Desert Corp troops tried, but failed, to take Amman on 18 March, 1918. With Allied advances, by late September 1918 the Turkish 4th Army were forced to flee, and on 26 September the ANZAC Mounted Division captured the village. British troops remained in the town until December 1919.

On 2 March 1921, Emir (Prince) Abdullah arrived in Amman from the Kingdom of the Hijaz with about 500 troops. At that time the town was home to around 6,000 people, who proceeded to decorate the town in anticipation of his arrival and to accompany him to the mayor’s house singing national Arab songs. By April he had agreed with Winston Churchill that he would rule Trans-Jordan from Amman with support from British airpower, a new 750-man Arab Legion force, and two armoured cars located in the city. This was the foundation of the Jordanian state.

Al-Balad quickly grew as a thriving locale of merchants and eaters, places of worship and meeting places. Though today fewer West Ammanis come to al-Balad to do their shopping, preferring the newer shopping malls that have sprung up around the city, the core of al-Balad remains vibrant with street life, restaurants and cafes, perfumeries, souqs (markets) and punters looking for bargains.

Where to start your discovery of al-Balad?

Al-Balad is the traditional market area of Amman where you can find almost everything – and for much less than you would pay in the western suburbs. As in many markets, the initial price is usually higher than will be accepted, so feel free to bargain with a smile.

Tip: Al-Balad is always busy and visitors are always welcome, but remember that Friday is a Muslim holy day, and so shops may be closed that day or will close during prayers. As a sign of respect it is a good idea to dress conservatively when exploring al-Balad.
6. Place your steps back to the Nymphaeum, turning right after Al-Bakr Bank and the Nymphaeum and continue by the fruit and vegetable seller on your left to the end of the street. Here you will find a police booth in the centre of the road. Turning left, cross the street and take the first right into Al-Dawwal, where you will find numerous traditional dresses and costumes in every shade and hue imaginable. As you continue straight another street will merge - keep to the right to ensure not to miss the Gold Souq (Gold Market).

At the Gold Souq, if up by the hub of gold giving attention for the windows, jewelry of every shape and style imaginable (both gold and silver) hang to tempt passers by. Wander into and among the little alleys off to the right and look where most of Amman’s buy their wedding trousseau. The traditional 21-chart golds of the souk is sold by weight, and its fine workmanship is essentially a gift. If you are the first customer of the day, you may be part of an old gold souq tradition and receive a gift of nuts to share so as to bless the day with an early sale. Enjoy bargaining here for whatever takes your fancy.

7. Back out at the entrance to the Gold Souq, turn right on King Faisal Street near Time Center Shop, you should find a small peanut stand known as Sudani nuts.

Buy a bag of freshly roasted peanuts from the vendor and participate in a classic tale of migration and survival in the Middle East. Omar Barawwi (Abu Ahmed), the founder, left Egypt as a young man heading to Mecca on the Hajj. He became stranded in Sudan (hence the name Sudani) for a month of Ramadan that was especially tough. From there he fled the new Soviet government in Bukhara. As you explore the outside, you will find a small peanut stand known as Sudani nuts.

Stop and try
There are several fresh fruit stands along this route, and everyone eats here, including the Royal Family. Started by Habibah is the one alley and the one parallel to it. At the entrance to Jafra Café, this is the entrance to Jafra Café.

Stop and try
Opposite the Jafra Café, there is a small entrance to Jafra Café. There is no wider reach, and everyone eats here, including the Royal Family. Started by Habibah is the one alley and the one parallel to it. Stop and try

This is one of the oldest, well preserved stone buildings in the heart of Amman. Built in 1924 it caught the attention of Mamdouh Bisharat, the “Duke of Mukheibeh,” who immediately leased the building and set it up as an example and pioneer project to stand-up to the onslaught of concrete and aluminum “culture” with the aim of keeping the city’s authenticity and character alive in the collective memory of its inhabitants. The Diwan’s doors are always open for talents, new and old, whatever it’s music, writing, painting, poetry or drama. Casual discussions on the history of Amman, regularly take place with guests and participants including royals, intellectuals, writers, poets, artists, historians, students, foreign and local, and the heart of Amman. You drop by and are welcomed into the Diwan’s Diwan and immediately understand that the Diwan lives up to its name – Diwan in Arabic means the section of the house where the doors are always open to guests.

11. This is the entrance to Jafra Café. The Café delightful sunlit balcony over the main street offers a wonderful place to people watch, whether it be on the way to the main side alley, or to stop and have a typical Jordanian meal you can find. Sometimes the heart of Amman can be noisy and provide funds to encourage the private sector financial institution to stand up to the onslaught of concrete and aluminum “culture” with the aim of keeping the city’s authenticity and character alive in the collective memory of its inhabitants. The Diwan’s doors are always open for talents, new and old, whatever it’s music, writing, painting, poetry or drama. Casual discussions on the history of Amman, regularly take place with guests and participants including royals, intellectuals, writers, poets, artists, historians, students, foreign and local, and the heart of Amman. You drop by and are welcomed into the Diwan’s Diwan and immediately understand that the Diwan lives up to its name – Diwan in Arabic means the section of the house where the doors are always open to guests.

Stop and try
Over the Diwan is a first-floor café with a balcony overlooking the main street with flags of the world pasted on the wall. This is Amman/Auberge, a typical Jordanian café. It’s a perfect place to grab some Arabic coffee, play a game of backgammon or watch the hustle of downtown life.

Make sure that you look right at the Arab Bank building at #22.

Although the Arab bank’s current headquarters are outside of Al-Balad, this was the original headquarters. The Arab Bank has had a profound impact on the Middle East. Founded by Abdel Hameed Shoman in 1930 in Jerusalem, the Arab Bank was the first private sector institution in the Arab world. The headquarters were moved to Amman in 1948 as the result of the war. Today it is the largest Arab banking branch network world wide, and has helped thousands of Jordanian businesses develop. The Shoman Foundation, set up in 1978 and funded by the bank, has given grants to support the education of thousands of Arab students, provides funds to encourage scientific research and increased intellectual cooperation around the Arab world.

12. From the entrance, keep walking down the street and turn right, passing the tempting sweet shops and turn right again as the corner. Keep a lookout to your right and in a small building away of tables you will see a fancy falafel place.

Stop and try
Enter the little alleyway beside Al-Musk Satwa where you will find a couple of interesting restaurants in that alley and one parallel to it. Stop and try

The Cafe offers a welcoming place where you can soak up the atmosphere, chat with friends and send it. Or try some falafel from Falafel Fouad, also in this alley.

13. Jordanian sweets and the road will veer right and after a few minutes you will reach the Jordan Post Office. Directly across the street, in and among the old post offices leading to a covered alley, this is the entrance to the Al-Balad.

The Café delightful sunlit balcony over the main street offers a wonderful place to people watch, whether it be on the way to the main side alley, or to stop and have a typical Jordanian meal you can find. It is an established and provides funds to encourage the private sector financial institution to stand up to the onslaught of concrete and aluminum “culture” with the aim of keeping the city’s authenticity and character alive in the collective memory of its inhabitants. The Diwan’s doors are always open for talents, new and old, whatever it’s music, writing, painting, poetry or drama. Casual discussions on the history of Amman, regularly take place with guests and participants including royals, intellectuals, writers, poets, artists, historians, students, foreign and local, and the heart of Amman. You drop by and are welcomed into the Diwan’s Diwan and immediately understand that the Diwan lives up to its name – Diwan in Arabic means the section of the house where the doors are always open to guests.

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