

Jordanian Footsteps



Roman theatre, Amman

Mark Patterson takes to the streets of Jordan to discover sights and sounds that escape most visitors.



Mosaic floor, Madaba



The Citadel, Amman



When people make their first visit to Jordan they tend to focus on Petra, Jerash and Wadi Rum, and as inspiring as these are there are some fantastic experiences to be had elsewhere in the country. As we are always keen to encourage people to see a little more of the places we love, I found myself in Jordan at the end of the year with a remit to trial two new walking tours in the cities of Amman and Madaba.

In the company of Rula, who works indefatigably on our behalf in Jordan, we began the Amman walking tour at Wild Jordan, the interpretive centre for the Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature (RSCN). They run a number of guest houses in Jordan's nature reserves which we love, and their centre in Amman is a feast of information and crisp city views from its perched vantage point. Once we had taken a coffee, we descended into Amman down a long flight of steps.

From Wild Jordan we cut a path through the city and soon found ourselves in the heart of the colourful vegetable market, then stopped for traditional Jordanian pastries at a great little shop which helped keep our energy levels up.

At the end of the street we paused in front of the King Hussein mosque.

I am undecided as to whether it is Ottoman or Mamluke in design, but it is charming nonetheless! The short walk onwards reveals the magnificent Roman theatre, an imposing incongruity in the centre of the city, unmoved by nearly two millennia of history. We climbed to the top tier of its seating and absorbed the wonderful view of The Citadel, our next stop.

It is quite a steep climb to The Citadel, and although there was a vehicle on hand we decided to walk and stop to take photographs along the way. Our reward was great views of the city from amongst the Roman and Umayyad ruins, and a leisurely stroll through the Jordan Archaeological Museum.

I found the walking tour of Madaba a very different experience. Madaba's streets are less busy than Amman's and the buildings older, yet the sense of history is probably stronger. I did this tour without the aid of Rula or a guide, but with a tourist board map and a few road signs it was actually very simple to find my way around.

Madaba has a strong Christian heritage and I started the tour at the Church of St George. It is famous for a sizeable and intricate mosaic map of the Holy Land, probably intended as a guide for pilgrims, dating to the 6th century AD. Though initially

confusing, once you locate Jerusalem the depth and detail of the map emerges. No less inspirational are more recent Orthodox icons that adorn the church wall.

I carried on next to the Archaeological Park, which contains the remains of two churches and a hall, all adorned with mosaics. Mosaics have long been Madaba's lifeblood, it being the location of one of the region's most prolific mosaic schools under the Emperor Justinian. In the Church of the Virgin a walkway gets you a decent top-down view of the extensive and beautiful mosaics, while at the Church of St Elias I was lucky enough to find restoration work under way: I quickly became engrossed in the painstaking process that brings the mosaics back to their original brilliance.

After perusing the museum I walked the longest section of the tour, down a steep hill with views over the surrounding countryside to the Church of the Apostles. Little remains of the original church structure, but mosaics decorate the floors and chapels to the side, and a modern roof and walls have been raised to protect the entire structure and give the same sense of reverence as an active church.

In September, when I visited, the summer heat lingered and there were

plenty of other people marvelling at the mosaic map in the Church of St George but we had the Archaeological Park, the museum and the Church of the Apostles to ourselves. In my opinion they merit a visit as much as the Church of St George, and that is the beauty of taking to the streets of Madaba and Amman: getting away from the whistle-stop coach tours and so much more than just the popular sights.

Mark Patterson
Jordan Specialist

FACT FILE

A ten-day trip to Jordan including visits to Petra, Jerash, Wadi Rum, Amman and Madaba plus return flights starts from £1,750 per person. For details please contact Mark or Sarah on 01993 838 415.

