

Amman



While neighbouring medieval cities Damascus and Cairo are steeped in rich antiquity, Amman is largely a modern construction devoid of grand Islamic architecture. Despite its Roman origins as the ancient city of Philadelphia, Amman was little more than a sleepy village prior to the arrival of the Hejaz Railway between Syria and Arabia in the early 20th century.

Following the formation of the state of Israel in 1948, Amman absorbed a massive flood of Palestinian refugees and its population doubled in two weeks. Indeed, the face of Amman has been shaped over the past 60 years by the arrival of hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees. Conservative and Islamic in its sympathies, Eastern Amman and the downtown areas are home to the vast majority of the urbanised poor.

However, residents talk openly of two Ammans. In contrast to the east, Western Amman is a world apart, with leafy residential districts, cafés, bars and art galleries. Fostered by a new generation of educated, tolerant and outward-looking youth, Western Amman pushes the boundaries of a cultural life that had been kept under close rein by Islamic conservatives.

Perspective is everything in Amman, and it's impossible to gain a full understanding of the city, or even Jordan, without visiting both Eastern and Western Amman. From the kinetic chaos of the earthy downtown to the stately calm of the urbane western suburbs, Amman is a multicultural city, home to Jordanians of varying backgrounds. While it's certainly not in the same league as emerging international centres like Dubai, Amman is a thoroughly modern Arab city with a diverse vision for the future.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Stand on top of **Jebel al-Qala'a** (p97), where you can visit the ruins of the Citadel while taking in views of the modern city
- Admire the engineering precision of the **Roman Theatre** (p98), Amman's most spectacular ancient monument
- Take in an art exhibition at **Darat al-Funun** (p101), and then sip a cappuccino in its café set amid Byzantine ruins
- Join the beautiful people for a glass of wine or a puff of the hubbly bubbly in the **bars and cafés** (p111) of Shmeisani and Abdoun
- Be one of the first visitors to the **National Museum** (p100), set to open in 2009



