



Jerash, Irbid & the Jordan Valley

جرش & إربد & الشمال

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Why Go?

You might expect that the far north of Jordan, with its exceptional Roman ruins, biblical associations, lively cities and complex terrain, would feature as a standard part of any visitor's trip to the country. This, however, is not the case and the region receives relatively few visitors compared with Petra and the south. For those in the know, this is excellent news as it means that it is quite possible to enjoy epic sites like Jerash without the epic crowds normally associated with a world-class destination.

Although many of the sites can be covered in a day trip from Amman, this ancient and populous region, dotted with olive groves and pine forests and liberally strewn with the ruins of Rome's great Decapolis cities, repays a longer visit. The availability of public transport and friendly accommodation facilitate this and if the springtime flowers happen to be blooming, it will prove to be a hard region to leave.

When to Go

The natural time to visit the northern part of Jordan is in spring (March to mid-May) when the black iris, the country's national flower, puts in a shy appearance along roadsides and a profusion of knee-high wildflowers spill across the semiarid hillsides.

For culture vultures, the hot summer months of July and August bring music and poetry to the Roman ruins in the Jerash Festival of Culture & the Arts.

From early November to January, while the region's hill towns shiver through winter, sub-tropical fruits ripen in the Jordan Valley.

Best Places to Stay

- » Hadrian Gate Hotel (p90)
- » Olive Branch Resort (p90)
- » Biscuit House Bed & Breakfast (p95)
- » Qalet al-Jabal Hotel (p93)

Best Places to Eat

- » Lebanese House (p90)
- » Umm Qais Resthouse (p103)
- » Pella Rest House (p106)
- » Bethany Touristic Restaurant (p110)

History

When travelling around the far north of Jordan, you may notice the name 'Gilead' crop up from time to time. This was the region's name in biblical times, defined by the sculpting waters of the Yarmouk River to the north and the once-mighty River Jordan to the west. The hills of Gilead have been occupied since antiquity, and were once home to the Roman Decapolis. Largely established during the Hellenistic period, these 10 city-states flourished along the boundaries of the Greek and Semitic lands. The Romans transformed these cities into powerful trading centres – the torchbearers of Roman culture at the furthest reaches of the empire.

If you're wondering where these cities are today, chances are you are walking on them! Northern Jordan is the most densely populated area in the country, and is home to the major urban centre of Irbid as well as dozens of small towns and villages which have largely engulfed many of the ancient sites. With a bit of amateur investigation it's easy to make out the ancient tells (mounds) and archaeological remains of the Decapolis, scattered among Gilead's rolling hills. If you haven't the time or inclination for such sleuthing, just head for Umm Qais (Gadara), Pella and most especially Jerash, where there are enough clues among the standing columns, amphitheatres and mosaic floors to conjure the full pomp and splendour of the Roman past.

Nature Reserves

There are two reserves in the north of Jordan, both encompassing rare woodland. **Ajloun Forest Reserve** (p93) is the more developed of the two, with excellent hiking trails and accommodation options. **Dibeen Forest Reserve** (p91) is a popular spot for weekend picnics.

Dangers & Annoyances

This region is bordered by Israel and the Palestinian Territories to the west and by Syria to the north. Given the sensitivity of relations between these countries, a bit of discretion is advised when travelling near the Yarmouk or Jordan Valleys. There are many checkpoints, particularly around the convergence of those two valleys near Umm Qais, so it is imperative to carry your passport and, if driving, your licence and car-rental details. Don't hike too close to either border. Avoid taking photographs near the border area – this includes photographing the River Jordan near checkpoints.



JERASH, IRBID & THE JORDAN VALLEY

Northern Highlights

- 1 Wander the colonnaded streets of **Jerash** (p83), a spectacularly well-preserved Roman provincial city
- 2 Hike along the trails of **Ajloun Forest Reserve** (p93) in the shade of trees
- 3 Visit the fairy-tale castle of **Qala'at ar-Rabad** (p92), one of Jordan's most impressive Islamic structures
- 4 Survey views of three countries from the basalt ruins of **Umm Qais** (p101)
- 5 Conjure all eras of Jordanian history at the complex archaeological site of **Pella** (p104)
- 6 Peruse the exhibits at the **Museum of Archaeology & Anthropology** (p96), within the vibrant campus of Yarmouk University in Irbid
- 7 Travel the subtropical **Jordan Valley** (p100), sampling seasonal fruits
- 8 Scoop water from the River Jordan at **Bethany** (p109), where Jesus was reputedly baptised
- 9 Amble by traditional houses in the souq town of **Salt** (p106) and discover how the town came by its name