

Jerash, Irbid & the Jordan Valley

جرش & إربد & الشمال

Includes ➔

Jerash	77
Dibeen Forest Reserve	86
Ajloun Forest Reserve	88
Irbid	91
Abila (Quwayliba)	94
The Jordan Valley	94
Al-Himma (Mukheiba)	96
Umm Qais (Gadara)	96
Pella (Taqqabat Fah)	99
Salt	101
Bethany-Beyond-the-Jordan (Al-Maghtas)	103

Best Places to Stay

- ➔ Hadrian Gate Hotel (p84)
- ➔ Olive Branch Resort (p84)
- ➔ Biscuit House Bed & Breakfast (p90)
- ➔ Qalet al-Jabal Hotel (p88)

Best Places to Eat

- ➔ Lebanese House (p85)
- ➔ Umm Qais Resthouse (p98)
- ➔ Bethany Touristic Restaurant (p105)

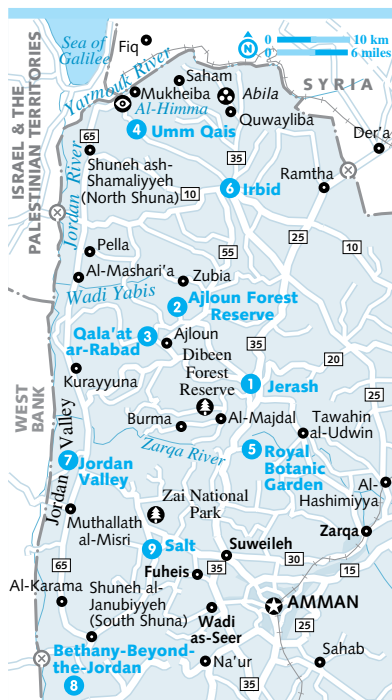
Why Go?

The far north of Jordan is frequently eschewed by visitors, in favour of Petra's grandeur and the splashy attractions of the Dead and Red Seas. However, this is a region rich in ancient ruins and biblical associations, all set in rolling countryside that's ablaze with wildflowers in springtime.

The epic Roman city of Jerash is the north's big hitter, a world-class destination without the crowds. Its contemporary, Umm Qais, is smaller but offers views of three countries from its ruins. At Bethany, you can visit the spot on the River Jordan where Christ was said to have been baptised, while Jordan's Islamic history is well-represented by the castle of Qala'at ar-Rabad, perched atop an imposing hill, and the well-preserved Ottoman trading town of Salt. If all this history feels like too much, you can easily get away from it all on the hiking trails of the Ajloun and Dibeen forest reserves.

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 semi-arid 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, sub-tropical fruits ripen in the Jordan Valley while the region's hill towns shiver through winter.



Jerash, Irbid & the Jordan Valley Highlights

- 1 Wander the colonnaded streets of **Jerash** (p79), a spectacularly well-preserved Roman provincial city.
- 2 Hike along the trails of **Ajloun Forest Reserve** (p88) in the shade of trees.
- 3 Visit the fairy-tale castle of **Qala'at ar-Rabad** (p87), one of Jordan's most impressive Islamic structures.
- 4 Survey views of three countries from the basalt ruins of **Umm Qais** (p96).
- 5 Discover the richness of Jordan's flora at the **Royal Botanic Garden** (p86).
- 6 Peruse the exhibits at the **Museum of Archaeology & Anthropology** (p91), within the vibrant campus of Yarmouk University in Irbid.
- 7 Travel the subtropical **Jordan Valley** (p94), sampling seasonal fruits.
- 8 Scoop water from the River Jordan at **Bethany** (p103), where Jesus was reputedly baptised.
- 9 Amble by traditional houses in the souq town of **Salt** (p101) and discover how the town came by its name.

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 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 (p88) is the more developed of the two, with excellent hiking trails and accommodation options. The Dibe'en Forest Reserve (p86) is a popular spot for weekend picnics. Not strictly a nature reserve, but worth checking out, is the soon-to-be-opened Royal Botanic Garden (p86) at Rumman.

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