

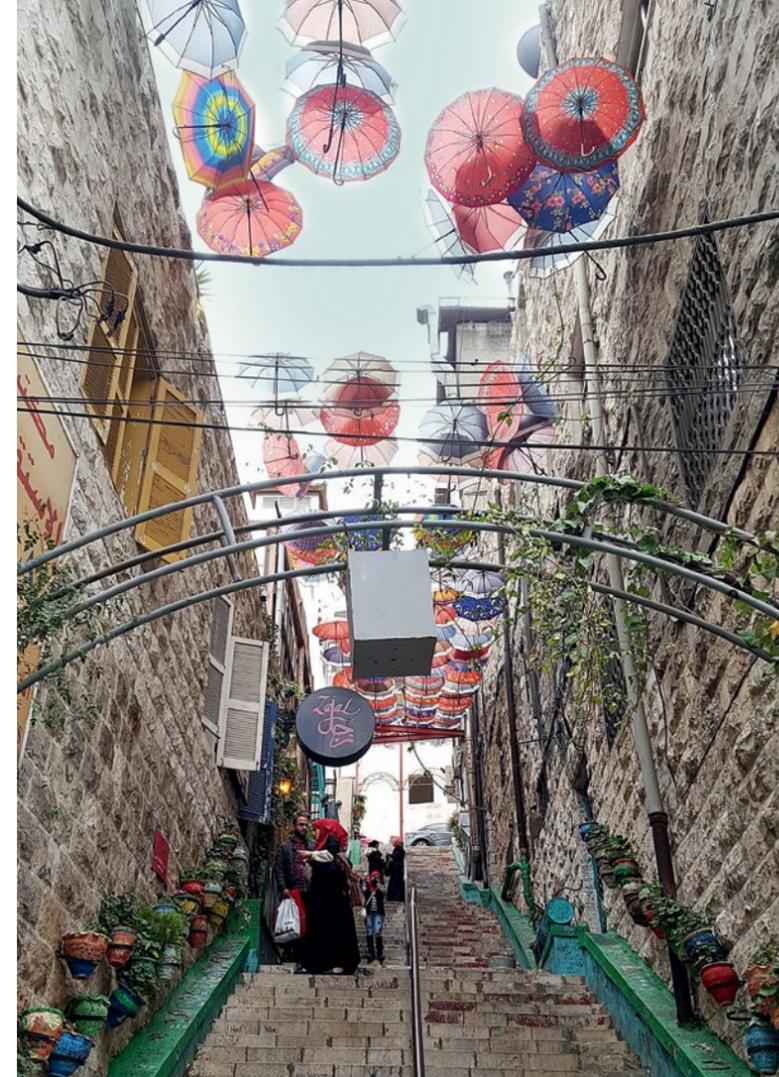
The Temple of Hercules at the Amman Citadel is reportedly the only surviving structure that was made of Greek marble in ancient Rome.

All's Sweet In Amman

Instead of using it as a base for the more exciting Jordanian destinations, *Charukesi Ramadurai* decides to give capital **Amman** a separate place on her itinerary. And she's not disappointed.



Shisha is part of the popular culture in Amman.



From left: The Roman Amphitheatre at Amman is oriented north to keep the sun off the spectators; Amman is a city of seven hills; dozens of varieties of sweets and nuts can be found in the old city souks.

It was the night before Christmas.

And it was a typical Jordanian winter night, with an annoyingly persistent drizzle adding a bite to the cold weather. I walked aimlessly with my husband on Amman's Rainbow Street, touted as the city's hippest hub. I had read that this part of the Jabal Amman district was where the city's young and restless hung out all night. Sure enough, the street was packed with people of all ages: groups of boisterous teenagers on skateboards, happy families eating ice cream and roasted chestnuts from street stalls, and hip youngsters thronging the many shisha bars lining the stretch. Suddenly, my attention was caught by something peculiar in the glass window of a popular clothing store. A red sweatshirt bore the slogan, "Go Jesus, It's Your Birthday!" We had landed in Amman a few hours ago, and of all the things I had expected from Jordan's capital, this was not one.

Thinking back, I'm not sure I had any expectations from Amman at all. Like most travellers to this Hashemite kingdom, I was ready to use it as an airport base to spend the night, before heading on to the country's marvellous UNESCO heritage sites such as Petra and Wadi Rum. But I am so glad I decided to give the capital a chance, a couple of days to be precise.

In that short time, I managed to take in a tiny bit of the city's ancient history: famous sites, a few museums, some bustling souks, and just for contrast, a couple of swanky shopping malls. I serendipitously walked into old bungalows tucked away in the narrow lanes of its many leafy neighbourhoods, now repurposed into cooking classes for Jordanian cuisine and boutiques selling perfumed Dead Sea products.

The second morning, we headed to the Roman Amphitheatre, navigating the multiple staircases and alleyways of the old city our phone maps took us through. Locals are proud of the fact that the

amphitheatre, though built in typical Roman style into the hillside, was no venue for bloodthirsty fights between gladiators and lions. Built sometime in the second century (and now partly restored), it was meant to be an open space for gatherings, entertainment, and recreation; it's said to be capable of holding over 5,000 people at a time. Even that early in the day, both locals and visitors had found themselves cosy corners from which to watch the city come to life.

The amphitheatre is still used for hosting concerts in the milder summer months. Since our timing was off, we had to be content with a quick browse through the Folklore Museum and the Museum of Popular Traditions that bookend the entrance to the arena.

By the time we emerged out on the road, the souks were open for business. Like all traditional bazaars of the region, the area was a hodgepodge of colours, smells, and sounds. A whiff of pepper and saffron floating in the air told us that we were near the spice souk, and we followed our noses to

the source of the aroma. We found vendors doing brisk business there, evidently enjoying the act of haggling as much as their customers did.

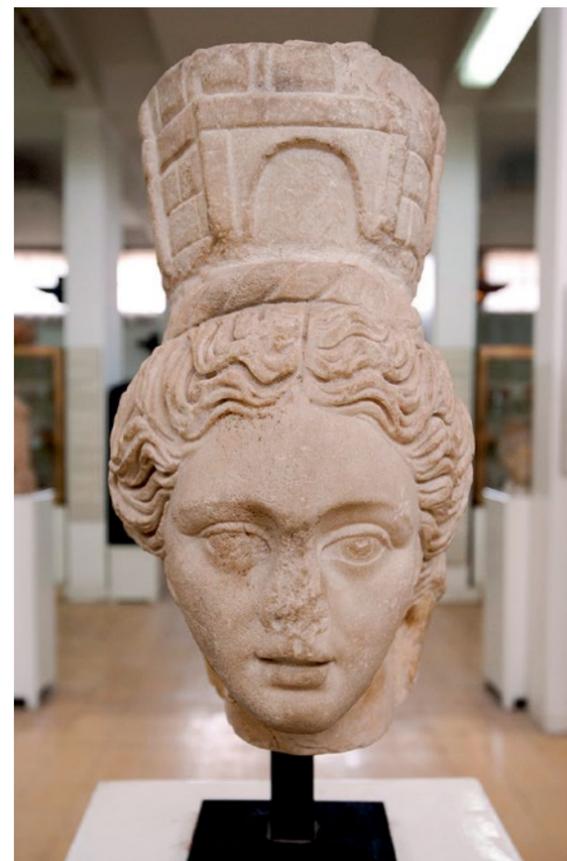
After walking through the expansive market area, crossing one souk after the other—fresh fruit and vegetables, jewellery, clothes (there was even one for just bridal wear, lace and lingerie hidden within the popular Souk Mango)—we finally decided to take a break for lunch. Right around the corner was the iconic Hashem, a small, no-frills restaurant that has been serving up delicious hummus, *fūl* (tangy dip made with fava beans cooked and mashed to a pulp), and crisp falafel for nearly 100 years now.

After a scrumptious meal, the mere thought of more walking made us groan. And so, we hailed a cab to the Citadel, perched on top of Amman's highest hill, Jebel al-Qala'a. The Citadel is the beating heart of Amman's ancient history, believed to have been built in the Bronze Age, and destroyed and rebuilt many times over the centuries.

Just after the ticket gate, three stone slabs summarised the growth of this city over the eras. Under Roman rule, roughly around 230 BC, Amman played a starring role as the capital of the



Clockwise, from left: The alternating black and white stones of the Abu Darwish Mosque exhibit traditional Levantine architecture; a gold souk located in the downtown area; exhibits of ancient civilisations are found at the Jordan Museum of Folk Traditions; window shopping in a souk.



CLOCKWISE: SHUTTERSTOCK: PETER ADAMS/GETTYIMAGES; CHRISTOPHER GROENHOUT/GETTYIMAGES; CHARUKESI RAMADURAI

region and was known as Philadelphia, after the ruler Ptolemy Philadelphus. Before that, around 1200 BC, it was Rabbath Ammon, the capital of the Ammonites, as mentioned in the Old Testament. From those glory days to its present-day urban chaos, Amman has come a long way, and the Citadel is living proof of its journey. Excavations are carried out regularly inside the premises, throwing up new discoveries every few years, most of which are on display at a small archaeological museum in the complex.

The most impressive bit of the Citadel was the Temple of Hercules, or what remains of it today. Built around 161 AD, the ancient structure features two massive pillars supporting a narrow ledge of ceiling, creating the illusion of a royal arch from which to view the distant spread of Amman, its mosques and minarets, markets and shoppers, roads and cars mere specks down below. From the broken ramparts, the amphitheatre was also visible in its entirety, the city sprawled out around it. As we stood there, trying to make sense of everything we had seen and heard about Amman in less than 24 hours, the voices of a dozen muezzins from all over the city rose in prayer. Later that day, in the Taj Mall, we saw young kids learning to make gingerbread houses, even as their hijab-clad mothers watched fondly and fathers lined up to pay for their mini sleigh rides.

On our last day, Jordan Museum (jordanmuseum.jo) was the first on our list of places to visit. The museum was rated by our trusty guidebook as one of the best in the Middle East, and what a treat it turned out to be! From two-headed plaster statues created in 7500 BC to precious Dead Sea scrolls, the museum exhibited some priceless antiques. There were also interactive music exhibits, kiosks printing

out our names in Latin, Aramaic, and Arabic, and an entire section devoted to the region's contribution to science and technology.

That evening, I wanted to check out another slice of Amman's history, this time very much contemporary. Hidden in a lane off Rainbow Street, the Books@Cafe store (booksatcafe.com) had begun life as Amman's first internet cafe almost 15 years ago. Today, its ground floor boasts books on a stunning range of themes: from the coffee-table *Humans of Amman* to pulpy Deepak Chopra reinterpretations of the *Kama Sutra*. A conspicuous signboard near the door urges everyone to smile, be polite, extend tolerance, and generally be good people.

On the upper level, which is now a cafe, we lingered over our cappuccinos and pizza, more interested in the people than the food itself (which was undeniably excellent). As I looked around, a young woman in a hijab caught my attention. She was sitting in a corner tapping away at her laptop, a coffee cup perched on the table and a heady shisha sitting next to her. Just like all other women in the city, working or hanging out or shopping, she was completely at ease. When our eyes met for an instant, she greeted me with a confident smile before getting back to her work. This girl and moment symbolised Amman for me: a city that embraces its history and culture without any qualms, even as it marches steadily towards a modern future. ✕