




Immèrsè in Jòrdaniàn Cùlturè



How could you invalidate prejudice and stereotype of a culture and its people? There is no better way than to immerse yourself in that culture and experience their way of life firsthand. I did it in order to test my (sadly) built up prejudice on Arabian culture and people, so I packed up and took off to one Arab country.

BY WAHYUNI KAMAH | PHOTOGRAPHS BY WAHYUNI KAMAH



PAGE 32:
View of city Jerash
from the village.

THIS PAGE:
The cute children in
the family house.

PAGE 35:
TOP
The shrine of Prophet
Houd in the village.

BOTTOM
The road in-An Nabi
Houd village.

MY BEST OPTION was Jordan. It is a small country in the Middle East, strategically bordered on Palestine and Israel in the west, Saudi Arabia in the south, Iraq in the east and Syria in the north. The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan is ruled by King Abdullah II. The monarchy which is populated by around 6.4 million people offers a myriad of natural and historical attractions which I did not want to miss. In addition, Jordan is less conservative than, say, Saudi Arabia—which prohibits women to travel solo—and, it is tourist friendly, too.

Ninety eight percent of Jordan's population is ethnic Arab and Islam is the major religion. The country that stretches on 92,300 sq km was historically influenced by different ancient civilizations. The Canaanite and Semitic people settled in Jordan in 8000 BC. Assyrian, Egyptians, Babylonian, and Persian empires invaded Jordan. The land was also witness to the missions of prophets: it is in the Jordan River where Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist. The famous archeological site of what remains of the city of Petra, the capital of the Arab Nabatean Kingdom in 100BC, is one of New Seven Wonders of the World.

The Romans dominated the area from the 4th century AD before Arab Muslims took over in the 7th century. Based on its long history, Jordan depicts a portrait of different civilizations.

My lack of knowledge of Arabic—the official language - would not be problem if I took a guided tour which is normally exclusive and costly. But it would compromise my mission to know genuine Jordanian culture. Therefore, the feasible approach is to stay in a village, where immersion with authentic local culture could be intensive. Consequently, I needed a local guide who could introduce me to local culture and become an interpreter.

An-Nabi Houd Village in Jerash Governates located around 50 kilometers from the north of Jordan's capital Amman was my *base camp* during my stay. It is where my local guide, Basil, and his extended family live. While most of Jordan's terrain is desert plateau, Jerash Governate is geographically hilly and green, but during the summer, the heat turns the grass fields dry and brown. The village is named after the Prophet Houd since his shrine is situated there. An-Nabi Houd Village is located on top of the

hill and gives a beautiful view of Jerash, the capital of Jerash Governate, and the surrounding villages below.

The houses in this village are constructed from limestone and have cubic shapes. Most houses are big, comprising of one or two floors since it is common that one house is occupied by a nuclear family and their married children. A prosperous family usually has a dedicated guest room. Some houses have small yards where trees like grape, olives, fig and herbs grow. I ended up staying in Basil's family house.

Village life is slow. In the summer, when school children have a three-month break, it is sleepy in the morning. Only men who work as civil servants or run their businesses in town get up early. Other family members start their day later. The division of labor is obvious. Men do external business and manage business in the market, shops, or restaurants, while women stay at home and take care of the domestic side of family life.

Summer days are long and on particularly hot, sunny days, villagers stay at home, and only come out in the afternoon when the weather is cooler,



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to enjoy the desert breeze. They usually hang out until the sun sets at 9 or 10 pm. On one of these occasions, the neighbors who are mostly Basil's immediate or distant family, came to greet me and extended their invitation to share meals at their houses. Accompanying and sitting with guests, is a sign that they welcome him or her. Jordanians are tea drinkers, so tea is usually served during these late afternoon jaunts. They mix tea with sugar and mint leaves. For the men and some women, it is also time for smoking the *sisha* (hookah).

Ahlan wa sahlan is a welcome greeting that I often heard when visiting a family. It's an Arabic way to say that

the guest is welcomed and she or he becomes part of the family. I naturally encountered some cultural surprises. The first was when I had meal with the family. Traditional Arab people always eat together surrounding one big plate of food—6 to 7 people per plate. They don't usually use individual plate. It is a way to tie family members. I was advised to only eat the food right in front me and to finish it because it makes the host happy.

"*La'..la'..*(no..no)," one of the women exclaimed when I was about to take a photo of her. Married women usually don't like to be photographed. Modesty is a must for women. Most adult women

wear black *jilbab* and *abaya* when they are outside or in the presence of non-*muhrim* (close kin that one is forbidden to marry). Inside *abaya*, they wear casual clothes. The men, however, wear modern clothes, shirts and trousers. Women wearing tight and short dresses publicly are considered ill-mannered. Hugging and touching cheeks is a same sex greeting. Physically touching anyone of the opposite sex is prohibited, so handshaking is also not allowed. It was not worrisome. As a foreigner, I had privilege. I could sit among male family members and mingle with them in family's room or yard. I got an excuse because I am their guest and



non-Jordanian. This is something that is impossible for Jordanian women to enjoy, since in the Arab culture, women are not supposed to mingle with men, and can only do so on family occasions.

Greeting people with *Assalamu alaikum* or *marhaba* and saying *shukron* for thank you are nice gestures which Jordanians appreciate for they are happy when we respect their culture. They are actually warm-hearted. As long as a guest behaves modestly and respects their culture, they take good care of you.

During my stay, I had several excursions. The nearest place to go is Jerash, the Roman city in the East whose ruins I could see from the village. Dating

back from 3rd century BC, Jerash was one of the Decapolis from the Hellenistic era. It is the best-preserved city that shows Roman urbanism in the Middle East. About 45 minutes from Jerash is a town called Ajlun, well-known for the Ajlun Castle, a prime example of military architecture of Arab Islam in the 1100's.

The trip to North Jordan also revealed the fertile and verdant part of Jordan. Taking the Jerash-Ajlun bus was not a bad experience at all. In the bus, male passengers always give precedence to women. The police were also highly visible throughout the city.

Pictures of King Abdullah II are normally found in highways and streets,

reflecting how Jordanians adore him. Highways in Jordan are excellent. It is wide, smooth and free. The Desert Highway that connects North and South Jordan is legendary since it used to be an ancient trade route between Damascus in the North and Aqaba in South.

Other attractions include the Dead Sea, Madaba, Petra, Aqaba or Wadi Rum for little extreme adventure. In those places I could see different façades of Jordan as historical, natural and cultural charms. There are other rich nature reserves in Jordan which I missed visiting. It is like a call for me to come back.

For more info, please go to Venture Guide on page 94.



PAGE 36:
Jerash City with the gate to the ruins in the distance.

THIS PAGE:
INZET
Magloubah-Rice mixed with peas, tomatoes and spices.

BOTTOM
The bus connecting Jerash and Ajlun in Ajlun bus terminal

