

CROSSING JORDAN

Part II: Amman Adventures by Night and Day

By Ilana Brown

Getting a Hotel in Amman

Abdullah, our ever-helpful taxi driver, recommended a hotel. When we arrived it was after midnight and we just wanted beds. Ah, but we were forgetting the Arab custom of hospitality -- coffee and conversation. The manager told us that this was the hotel used by the “human shields” who had traveled from Amman to Iraq in early 2003 in protest of the war. As we filled out the registration forms, I noticed that they asked for a lot of information that I didn’t want to give, like my permanent address in Jerusalem. The manager said that we only needed to fill out our names, nationality and passport number. We gave him our forms and he peered through his glasses at each of our names in turn.

“Ilana Brown. You are of Russian heritage, no?” (Which part of my name gives that information away?) Well, it turns out that he had studied in Russia and loved St. Petersburg (Leningrad). Then he guessed that Sasha was of German extraction and Clay was of Austrian descent. All of this is, by the way, correct, but none of us (all traveling on US passports) has ever been in a situation where someone has guessed our heritage, much less correctly.

Then, out of the blue, the hotel manager said the name “Alexander Cohen” (Sasha’s real name is Alexander and his last name is not Cohen – or any obvious Jewish name). None of us looks particularly Jewish and in fact, we each have one parent who is not. Why would the hotel manager come up with this name? When we gave him questioning looks, he just chuckled and said that Alexander Cohen was a friend of his.

When we got upstairs to our room the three of us discussed the creepy meeting with the hotel manager. Were we being paranoid, or did he simply know a little too much? I felt as though he was a villain in the beginning of a movie where you can’t imagine how the heroes will escape. But I put this thought away in preparation for our late-night dinner with Abdullah.

We went to a simple, local place. When we walked in, everyone turned to look. It was 1:00 AM and there were no other women around. It was wall to wall packed with men. I felt uncomfortable: Not in danger, but clearly out of place.

After dinner, we went back to the hotel and settled into our beds. As we drifted off to sleep, we heard a key turn in the lock. Someone was trying to get in! Clay leapt across the room and took up a position next to the door (think Special Forces waiting for the bad guys to barge in). Sasha’s bed was right next to the door and he was ready to pounce. I, in a stunning display of great bravery, sat up in bed, pulled the covers to my chin and said, “Oh, my goodness!”

But no one came in.

Each of these events might have had a simple explanation, but packing them all into a few hours was just too much.

The Next Day.

We expected things to look less intimidating in the light of day, and even to feel a little silly about our paranoia the night before. But here's the funny thing about this particular day: Abdullah, our information-spouting cab driver, warned us that it was "graduation day." In celebration of receiving their test scores for graduation from high school, everyone would go out and shoot their guns in the air. Lovely. We spent the day in Amman hearing the staccato of gunshots throughout the day.

I chose to dress respectfully and modestly, but not to cover my hair. At tourist locations I felt pretty comfortable, especially since there were usually other tourists around who were dressed completely immodestly by Arab standards (shorts, tanks tops, etc). But then we went to the *souk* (open market) where there were no western tourists and hardly any women. At this point both Clay and Sasha suggested that I cover my hair. Sasha walked in front of me and Clay walked behind, and still every single person in the *souk* stared as I walked by. On the one hand I could have felt like a movie star -- everyone turning to look at me accompanied by my bodyguards -- but I was actually very nervous and desperately trying not to show it.

Abdullah's words rang in my ears: *Treat her like your sister. Everyone knows women lie.*

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