

CROSSING JORDAN

Part III: Parting Thoughts on Leaving Jordan

By Ilana Brown

I thought back to my visit to Egypt in 1997. In Luxor, I covered my hair and all the shopkeepers thought it was wonderful and called me Fatima (The Prophet Mohammed's daughter). What I remember from that visit was that I was treated very well. I respected them and they respected me in return. I did not feel that way in Amman.

In Sinai and Turkey too, I was treated quite well, but these are both places in which the tourist dollar (especially the US dollar) is king. They don't care who I am, what I do, or how I dress, as long as I am willing to put money in their pockets. This was not the case in the streets of Amman. Granted, in areas specifically geared to tourists they were more open-minded.

Having been to Egypt and Turkey did not really prepare me for travels in Jordan. For example, in Jordan I saw many families from other Arab countries on vacation. The most interesting were the Saudis (whom Sasha identified by the license plates on their gas-guzzling SUVs). The father wore a long white robe and the traditional Arab headdress, his four wives followed all in black with only their eyes visible (in some cases, even the eyes were veiled), and then all of them were followed by a herd of children. Sometimes you would see more than four veiled women. I wondered if those were daughters of age because in Islam you can only have four wives. (Maybe a concubine?) Who knows? In any case, I had never seen that before.

I saw women at restaurants who were completely covered, with only their eyes showing. How do they eat? They have to remove their veils, and -- so as not to be seen -- use one hand to shield their faces from on-lookers and eat with their other hand. If they need to use both hands, they have to look at the wall and shield themselves as much as possible, or put the veil back on.

Meanwhile, other families -- of other Muslim traditions -- were also at the restaurant. The wives and daughters all had their hair covered, but not their faces. Their faces were made up like china dolls.

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On our last night, back at the hotel preparing for dinner, Clay and Sasha asked me to change into something more bag-like, so as not to be so noticeable. For the first time in my life, I was asked to be frumpy on purpose! The next morning we left Amman and toured some other sites in the north. We saw wonderful Roman ruins in the town of Jerash and ended up at a Crusader castle in Ajloun. These ruins were on par with some of the best ruins I visited in Europe, Greece and Turkey (and Petra).

By this time I was ready to go back to Israel and both Sasha and Clay felt that it might be easier traveling without me as just men in an Arab country. I tended to agree. I don't do well as "property" and I was ready to go home. You might think that the three of us were overreacting, but I have been in plenty of situations where men honk as they drive by, or make comments while I'm on the beach. This was different. This was not "Hey Pretty Lady!" It was, "Who in the hell do you think you are walking around here showing off?" I don't know if I was in any actual danger, but I wasn't willing to put my safety on the line to find out.

Finally, I try hard to be open-minded -- especially when traveling -- and I went to Jordan knowing full well that Arab culture is different. I accept that in Jewish Orthodox homes and fundamentalist Christian homes different standards apply to women, and that these standards are accepted by both women and men. It would be hypocritical of me to suggest that only in Arab countries would these kinds of distinctions apply.

I went to Jordan expecting to find a country that had had some experience with tourists, and while I hardly expected to be greeted with open arms, I wasn't prepared to feel so unwelcome. The exception is in the Petra valley -- geared exclusively to tourists -- where the local vendors were used to westerners and don't care what you wear, what your politics are, or what you look like. You got money, come on in. "You are welcome," as all the vendors say.

But in Amman, it's much more complicated. In areas specifically geared to tourists you are fine. But everywhere else you had better fit in or you get stared at. And if you stare back there will be consequences. Off the tourist track you are subject to Arab rules, and you had better know what the rules are. In this case, ignorance is definitely not bliss.

So when I got home, I jumped on the net and started to do some research, which just reinforced how little I really knew all along. I don't pretend to have any answers, but I think I'm heading in the right direction. One thing I found on the net that might be of interest is: "Learning to Think like an Arab Muslim" by Edward Badolato (Exec VP of Homeland Security). <http://www.blackwaterusa.com/btw2004/articles/0503arabs.html>

By the way, I also did some research on blood feuds and honor killings. According to Jordanian law, honor killings are legal in cases of suspected adultery. I don't know if that has been repealed at this point. King Abdullah favors liberalization, and hopefully he will manage to bring about change. In the meantime, I will continue to ask questions and learn about the culture so that next time I cross the Jordan, we'll be ready for each other.

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