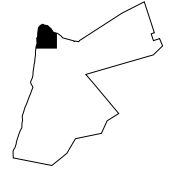


Jerash & the North

جرش & الشمال



The area to the north of Amman is the most densely populated in Jordan, with the major centres of Irbid and Jerash, as well as dozens of small towns dotted in among the rugged and relatively fertile hills.

These are the biblical Hills of Gilead, peppered with olive groves and pine forests that lend a distinctly Mediterranean feel to the region. This is also the heart of Jordan's increasingly important olive oil industry. The well-watered plateau is drained by the Yarmouk and Zerqa (the ancient Jabbok) Rivers, the two biggest tributaries of the Jordan River, the latter marking the ancient border between Ammon and Gilead.

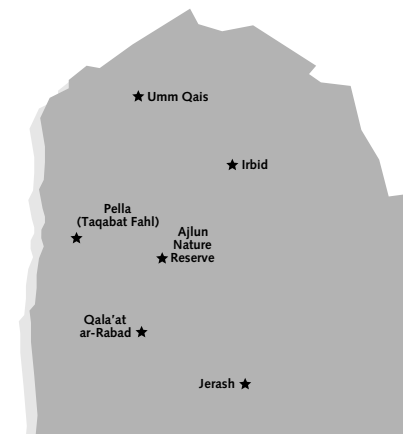
In this area lie the ruins of the ancient Roman Decapolis cities of Jerash (Gerasa) and Umm Qais (Gadara), both of which are well worth a visit. The impressive Islamic castle at Ajlun is also nearby and can be combined with pleasant walking trails at nearby Ajlun Nature Reserve.

Northeast of Irbid, the country flattens out to plains that stretch away into Syria. To the west lies the steamy Jordan Valley, one of the most fertile patches of land in the Middle East and pockmarked by ancient tells and archaeological remains.

In general northern Jordan is a good place to have a car, especially around Ajlun, which combines lovely scenery with light traffic, but it is still possible to see most things with public transport.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Wander the ruins and watch chariot racing at the wonderfully preserved Roman provincial city of **Jerash** (p108) with its superb Oval Plaza, theatres and temples
- Combine some pleasant hiking in the cool, shady **Ajlun Nature Reserve** (p116) with a visit to the fairy-tale Islamic fort of nearby **Qala'at ar-Rabad** (p114)
- Wander the excellent **Museum of Archaeology & Anthropology** (p117) at the vibrant Yarmouk University in Irbid, a great place to meet Jordanian students
- Take in awesome views over the Sea of Galilee from the off-beat Roman and Byzantine ruins of **Umm Qais** (p120)
- Dig through layers of time at tranquil **Pella** (p124), an ancient site which contains traces of all eras of Jordanian history



JERASH

📍 02

The ruins at **Jerash** (📞 6351272; adult/student & child under 15 JD5/2.500; 🕒 8am–4pm Oct–Apr, to 7pm May–Sep) are one of Jordan's major attractions and still have the power to evoke the ghosts of Rome. It's one of the best examples in the Middle East of a Roman provincial city, and is remarkably well preserved.

In its heyday, Jerash (known in Roman times as Gerasa) had a population of 15,000 to 20,000 inhabitants and, although it wasn't on any major trade route, its citizens prospered from the good agricultural land that surrounded it. The ancient walled city that survives today was the administrative, commercial, civic and religious centre of Jerash. The bulk of the inhabitants lived on the eastern side of Wadi Jerash (now the modern town of Jerash) and the two centres were linked by causeways and processional paths.

As you wander Jerash try to imagine life 2000 years ago: the centre bustling with shops and merchants, lined with cooling water fountains and dramatic painted façades. Picture today's empty niches filled with painted statues; buildings still clad in marble façades and decorated with carved peacocks and shell motifs; and churches topped with Tuscan-style terracotta tiled roofs. For a visual reconstruction of Jerash's finest buildings, check out the drawings at the visitor centre.

History

Although there have been finds to indicate that the site was inhabited in Neolithic times, Jerash rose to prominence from the time of Alexander the Great (333 BC).

In the wake of the Roman general Pompey's conquest of the region in 64 BC, Gerasa became part of the Roman province of Syria and then a city of the Decapolis (see opposite). Over the next two centuries, trade with the Nabataeans (the creators of Petra) flourished and the city grew extremely wealthy. Local agriculture and iron-ore mining in the Ajlun area contributed to the city's wellbeing. A completely new city plan was drawn up in the 1st century AD, centred on the classical features of a colonnaded main north–south street intersected by two side streets running east–west.

When the emperor Trajan annexed the Nabataean kingdom (around AD 106) more wealth found its way to Gerasa. Many of the

جرش

old buildings were torn down to be replaced by more imposing structures. Construction again flourished when Emperor Hadrian visited in AD 129. To mark a visit of such importance, the Triumphal Arch (now known as Hadrian's Arch) at the southern end of the city was constructed.

Gerasa reached its peak at the beginning of the 3rd century, when it was bestowed with the rank of Colony. Its ascendancy was, however, short lived – disturbances such as the destruction of Palmyra (Syria) in 273, the demise of the overland caravans and the development of sea trade pushed the city into a slow decline. The only respite came during the reign of Diocletian (around 300), which saw a minor building boom.

From the middle of the 5th century, Christianity was the major religion and the construction of churches proceeded apace. Under the Byzantine emperor Justinian (527–65) seven churches were built, mostly out of stones pillaged from the earlier Roman temples and shrines.

With the invasion of the Sassanians from Persia (now Iran) in 614, the Muslim con-

THE DECAPOLIS

The Roman commercial cities of what is now Jordan, Syria, Israel & the Palestinian Territories first became known collectively as the Decapolis in the 1st century AD. Despite the etymology of the word, it seems that the Decapolis consisted of more than 10 cities, and possibly as many as 18. No one knows for certain the reason behind such a grouping. In all likelihood the league of cities served a double function: to unite the Roman possessions and to enhance commerce. In Jordan, the main Decapolis cities were Philadelphia (Amman), Gadara (Umm Qais), Gerasa (Jerash), Pella (Taqqabat Fil), and possibly Abila (Qweilbeh) and Capitolias (Beit Ras, near Irbid).

The cities were linked by paved roads that allowed wagons and chariots to circulate rapidly; at Umm Qais and Jerash, the ruts carved by these wagons can still be seen in the stones of the city streets. The cities flourished during the period of Roman dominance in the east, but fell into decline with the dawn of the Umayyad dynasty, which was based in Damascus. Afterwards, the shift to Baghdad as the centre of the Muslim world dealt the Decapolis a final blow.

quest in 636 and the devastating earthquake in 747, Gerasa's glory days passed into shadow and its population shrank to about one-quarter of its former size.

Apart from a brief occupation by a Crusader garrison in the 12th century, the city was completely deserted until the arrival of the Circassians from Russia in 1878, after which the site's archaeological importance was realized and excavations began.

Information

BOOKS & MAPS

The free *Jerash* brochure published by the Jordan Tourism Board includes a map, some photos and a recommended walking route. It can be found at the visitor centre in Jerash or the Jordan Tourism Board in Amman.

Anyone with a particular interest in the history of Jerash should pick up one of the three decent pocket-sized guides: *Jerash: The Roman City*; *Jerash: A Unique Example of a Roman City*; or the most comprehensive and readable *Jerash*. All three are available at bookshops in Amman (around JD3 to JD5 each). *Jerash* by Iain Browning is a more detailed and expensive historical book.

ENTRANCE

The entrance to the site is south of the ancient city, close to Hadrian's Arch. The **ticket office** is in the complex of souvenir shops, along with a post office and café. Tickets are checked later at the South Gate.

Next to the South Gate is the **visitor centre**, which has informative descriptions and reconstructions of many buildings in Jerash as

well as a good relief map of the ancient city. There are toilets at the Jerash Rest House (p114), visitor centre and the souvenir shops area at the site entrance.

Allow at least three hours to see everything in Jerash and make sure you take plenty of water, especially in summer. It's best to visit Jerash before 10am or after 4pm because it's cooler, there will be less glare in your photos and also far fewer people at the site. Most of the buildings are at their best close to sunset. Remember, however, that public transport to Amman is limited after 5pm. It's possible to leave luggage at the Jerash Rest House while you visit the site, for no charge.

GUIDES

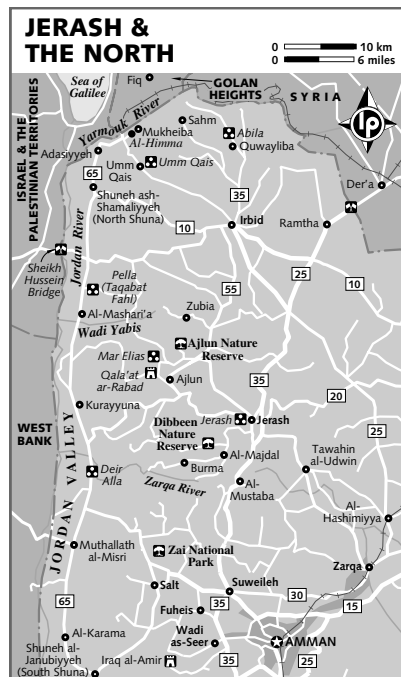
Anyone with a special interest in the history of Jerash may wish to hire a guide (JD5). Guides are available at the ticket checkpoint in front of the South Gate.

Sights

THE RUINS

At the entrance to the site is the striking **Hadrian's Arch**, also known as the **Triumphal Arch**. It's still an imposing structure, but it was originally twice as high when first built in AD 129 to honour the visiting Emperor Hadrian. The central arch is the highest at 13m and all three supported wooden doors. An unusual feature of the construction is the wreath of carved acanthus leaves above the base of each pillar. The arch was originally erected as a new southern entrance to the city, but the area between the arch and the South Gate was never completed.

Behind the arch is the partially restored **hippodrome**, built sometime between the



lined the street were deliberately built at an uneven height to complement the façades of the buildings that once stood behind them. Most of the columns you see today were reassembled in the 1960s.

Just prior to the intersection with the **south decumanus** (main street, running from east to west), and where the columns are taller, is the entrance to the **agora** (sometimes referred to as the **macellum**), where the main market was held and people gathered for public meetings around the central fountain.

Where the **cardo maximus** joins the south decumanus and north decumanus, ornamental tetrapylons were built. The **southern tetrapylon** consisted of four bases, each supporting four pillars topped by a platform and a statue. They are in varying stages of reconstruction; the southeastern one is the most complete. This intersection was made into a circular plaza in the 3rd century.

To the east of the intersection of the **cardo maximus** and south decumanus lay the former residential areas of Jerash, now buried beneath the modern town. To the west of the intersection are the ruins of some **Umayyad houses** dating from the 7th and 8th centuries.

About 100m north of the intersection are steps belonging to the 4th-century **cathedral** (probably little more than a modest Byzantine church despite the name). The gate and steps actually cover the remains of an earlier temple to the Nabataean god Dushara, and later rededicated to Dionysus.

Next along the main street is the elegant **nymphaeum**, the main ornamental fountain of the city, dedicated to the water nymphs. Built in about AD 191, the two-storey construction was elaborately decorated, faced with marble slabs on the lower level, plastered on the upper level and topped with a half dome. Water would cascade over the façade into a large pool at the front, with the overflow pouring out through seven carved lions' heads into drains in the street below.

Further along to the west (left) is the **propylaeum** (AD 150), the gateway to the Temple of Artemis. The gateway's portico lies in pieces in the street opposite the gateway. A stairway, flanked by shops, originally ran from here to the eastern residential area. The **propylaeum church** was later built over part of the stairway. From here you can still see the remains of a bathroom in the modern town below.

Behind the propylaeum, and on top of a small hill, is the well-preserved **Temple of Artemis**, dedicated to Artemis, the goddess of hunting and fertility (and daughter of Zeus). The temple was built between AD 150 and 170, and had 12 columns (11 are still standing), but the marble floors and statues have disappeared. Large vaults had to be built to the north and south of the temple to make the courtyard level; the vaults were used to store the temple treasures. After the edict of Theodorus in AD 386 permitting the dismantling of pagan temples, many of the materials were taken away for construction elsewhere. The temple was fortified by the Arabs in the 12th century, but was later substantially destroyed by the Crusaders.

At the intersection of the **cardo maximus** and the north decumanus is the more intact **northern tetrapylon**, dedicated to the Syrian wife of the emperor Septimus Severus. It was probably built as a gateway to the north theatre. This tetrapylon differs in style from the southern one. If its condition looks too good to be true that's because it is – it was rebuilt in 2000.

Just downhill (to the southeast) is the rubble of the huge **western baths**, measuring about 70m by 50m. Dating from the 2nd century AD, they represent one of the earliest examples of a dome atop a square room. Once an impressive complex of hot-, warm- and cold-water baths, they were partially destroyed by various earthquakes.

The **north theatre** is smaller than the south theatre and differs considerably in shape and design. It was built in about AD 165 for government meetings rather than artistic performances, and in 235 it was doubled in size. It has been magnificently restored and still holds about 2000 people. Look for the exuberant carvings of musicians and dancers at the base of the stairs.

The **cardo maximus** ends at the comparatively unimpressive **North Gate**. Built in about AD 115, it has not been restored as well as its southern counterpart and is probably not worth the detour. It linked the **cardo maximus** with the ancient road to Pella.

On the way back, check out the ruins of several **churches** that lie south and west of the Temple of Artemis. In all, 15 churches have been uncovered in Jerash and more are likely to be found. Behind (west of) the cathedral, above a fountain courtyard, the

Church of St Theodore, built in AD 496, has some limited mosaics. The **Church of St Cosmos and St Damianus** was dedicated to twin brothers, both doctors. It once had marvellous mosaic tiles, but most are now in the Museum of Popular Tradition in Amman. The **Church of St John the Baptist** was built in about AD 531, but is badly damaged. The **Church of St George**, built in about AD 530, is also destroyed.

Surrounding the ancient city for about 4.5km are remnants of the **city walls**, which were between 2.5m and 3.5m thick when built in the 4th century AD, although most of what remains dates from the Byzantine era. There were also originally 24 towers along the walls.

MUSEUM

Before you finish exploring the ancient city, try to visit the small **museum** (☎ 6312267; admission free; 🕒 8.30am–6pm Oct–Apr, to 5pm May–Sep) just to the east of (and uphill from) the Oval Plaza. It houses a small but good selection of artefacts from the site, such as mosaics, glass and gold jewellery, as well as coins found in a tomb near Hadrian's Arch. All items on display are well labelled in English. No photographs are allowed.

Just as interesting as the exhibits are the inscriptions, tombs and pillars lying higgledy-piggledy in the gardens outside the museum.

SOUND-AND-LIGHT SHOW

With the recent downturn in tourism the summer **sound-and-light show** (☎ 6351053; admission free) has been cancelled, though it may start up again. Check with the visitor centre.

Sleeping & Eating

Surprisingly, there's still no hotel in Jerash. We spotted Hadrian's Gate Hotel by Hadrian's Gate but it was closed every time we visited. If it opens while this book is being printed it will be a useful addition. There are a couple of decent places to stay in Ajlun (see p115). With an early start, you could cover Jerash and Ajlun in a day trip from Amman.

Olive Branch Resort (☎ 6340555; www.olivebranch.com.jo; s/d JD15/25, breakfast JD2.750; 📍 🚶) Around 7km from Jerash, off the road to Ajlun, this secluded and well-run place has great Tuscan-like views, with modern, comfortable rooms and good clean bathrooms. Some rooms come with a balcony. You can also camp in your/their tent for JD4/5 and use the nearby barbecue grills, hot showers and swimming pool (April–November). There's also a games room with billiards and foosball table and a good restaurant (mains JD3 to JD5). A taxi from Jerash costs JD2 one way; to Amman costs JD10 to JD12. Drive 5km from Jerash towards Ajlun, turn right for 1km and then right again for another 2km.

JERASH FESTIVAL

Since 1981 the ancient city of Jerash has hosted the annual Jerash Festival, under the sponsorship of Queen Noor. Events are held in the South Theatre, North Theatre and Oval Plaza in Jerash, as well as the Royal Cultural Centre in Amman, and other places like Umm Qais and Mt Nebo. Special programmes for children are also held at the Haya Cultural Centre in Amman.

The festival is held over 17 days from mid-July to mid-August. It features an eclectic array of performances including plays, poetry readings, opera and musical concerts from around the world, plus craft displays. More information is available from the **organisers in Amman** (☎ 06 5675199; www.jerashfestival.com.jo). Events are listed in English in the official souvenir news sheet, the *Jerash Daily*, printed in English every day of the festival, and the English-language newspapers published in Amman.

Tickets cost at least JD5 for events in Jerash, and about JD20 for more formal events in Amman and elsewhere. They are available from the Royal and Haya Cultural Centres, and (sometimes) the domestic JETT bus office in Abdali in Amman (see p100). JETT also offers one-way and return transport to Jerash during the festival (especially useful when public transport finishes at night). There is also a Jerash Festival office, next to the visitor centre near the South Gate, for information and buying tickets but it's not open at other times of the year and you'd be well advised to buy your tickets well in advance of arriving in Jerash.

Lebanese House (☎ 6351301; starters JD0.700-1, mains JD2.500-5; ☎ noon-11pm) A five- to 10-minute walk from Jerash's centre, this is a local favourite, with outdoor seating and a kids' play area. The Lebanese-style mezza range from frog's legs to *shinklish* (tangy white cheese). Culinary daredevils can try a pair of hot testicles (JD1.750), washed down by a glass of local Macheirus white wine. Maybe just stick to the starters...

Jerash Rest House (☎ 6351437; starters JD1-2, mains JD3-7; ☎ noon-5pm) This tour group restaurant by the main gates has decent à la carte meals but most people opt for the lunch buffet (JD5, plus 26% tax).

You'll find cheaper meals opposite the visitor centre, including at the **Al-Khayyam Restaurant** (barbecued meats JD2.500) or the **Janat Jerash (Paradise) Restaurant** (Al-Qayrawan St; mains JD2.500), both with nice terraces.

Getting There & Away

Jerash is 51km north of Amman, and the roads are well signed from the capital, especially from 8th Circle.

From Abdali bus station in Amman, public buses and minibuses (400 fils, 1¼ hours) leave regularly for Jerash, though they can take up to an hour just to fill up.

Jerash's new bus and service taxi station is a 15-minute walk west of the site, at the second set of traffic lights, behind the big white building. You can pick up a minibus to the station from outside the visitor centre (100 fils). Plenty of minibuses travel regularly to Irbid (300 fils, 45 minutes) and Ajlun (300 fils, 30 minutes) until around 4pm. If you don't want to head to the bus station you can normally flag down the bus to Amman from the main junction in front of the site.

If you're still in Jerash after 5pm, be prepared to hitch back to the capital. Service taxis sometimes leave as late as 8pm (usually later during Jerash Festival) but expect a wait. The tourist police are usually happy to cajole a passing motorist into offering a free ride back to Amman. A private taxi one-way costs around JD10; you may be able to bargain down to JD7. To Irbid costs JD8.

AJLUN

☎ 02

Ajlun (or Ajloun) is another popular and easy day trip from Amman, and can be combined with a trip to Jerash if you set

off early. In Ajlun town the mosque, just southwest of the main roundabout, has a minaret dating back some 600 years.

The highlight of the trip, however, is unquestionably the towering **Qala'at ar-Rabad**, 3km west of town. The countryside of pine forest and olive groves is good for hiking and is popular with picnicking locals in summer, when the surrounding hills are a few degrees cooler than the rest of Jordan. If possible, visit on a clear day – the views are superb.

Information

Housing Bank is located just south of the main roundabout in Ajlun, which changes money and has an ATM.

Tourist office (☎ /fax 6420115; ☎ 7am-1pm Sun-Thu) In the restaurant complex at the foot of the castle.

Sights

Qala'at ar-Rabad (Ar-Rabad Castle; admission JD1; ☎ 8am-4pm Oct-Apr, to 7pm May-Sep), built atop Mt 'Auf (about 1250m), is a fine example of Islamic military architecture. The castle was built by one of Saladin's generals (and also nephew), 'Izz ad-Din Usama bin Munqidh, in AD 1184-88, and was enlarged in 1214 with the addition of a new gate in the southeastern corner. It once boasted seven towers, and was surrounded by a dry moat over 15m deep.

The castle commands views of the Jordan Valley and three wadis leading into it – the Kufranjah, Rajeb and Al-Yabes – making it an important strategic link in the defensive chain against the Crusaders, and a counterpoint to the Crusader Belvoir Fort on the Sea of Galilee (Lake Tiberias) in present-day Israel & the Palestinian Territories. With its hilltop position, Qala'at ar-Rabad was one in a chain of beacons and pigeon posts that enabled messages to be transmitted from Damascus to Cairo in a single day.

After the Crusader threat subsided, the castle was largely destroyed by Mongol invaders in 1260, only to be almost immediately rebuilt by the Mamluks. In the 17th century an Ottoman garrison was stationed here, after which it was used by local villagers. The castle was 'rediscovered' by the well-travelled JL Burckhardt, who also stumbled across Petra (see p177). Earthquakes in 1837 and 1927 damaged the castle badly, but its restoration is continuing.

There is a useful explanation in English just inside the main gate, although nothing

else is signposted. It's fun to explore and the views are superb.

The castle is a tough uphill walk (3km) from the town centre, but minibuses very occasionally go to the top (about 100 fils). Alternatively, take a taxi from Ajlun (JD1 one way) or hitch a ride. A return trip by taxi from Ajlun (JD3), with about 30 minutes to look around, is money well spent.

Sleeping & Eating

There are two hotels on the road up to the castle; good options if you want to enjoy the sunset. Prices are negotiable at both.

Qalet al-Jabal Hotel (☎ 6420202; s/d/tr JD24/32/45 plus 10% tax) About 1km before the castle, this is probably the pick of the two, though it's a bit overpriced. The comfortable but slightly old-fashioned rooms come with a balcony, but the highlight is the fantastic outdoor terrace garden where meals can be served in summer (it's worth coming here for a drink if you have your own car). The family triples have their own private terrace with castle views. The hotel is 1.3km from Ajlun, by the turn-off to Mar Elias.

Ajlun Hotel (☎ 6420524; fax 6421580; s/d with tax & breakfast Oct-Apr JD13/20, May-Sep 18/30JD) The cheaper option is 500m down the road from the castle. Although it has smaller rooms, it isn't bad. Sadly only the top floors take advantage of the fine views. Hot water can be unpredictable.

Abu-Alez Restaurant (meals 1.500) by the main roundabout in Ajlun town, does the usual dish of chicken, hummus, salad and bread for around JD1.500. There are also shwarma stalls, such as the good **Al-Raseed** (meals 1.500), on the main roundabout. An alternative is to come prepared to join the locals for a picnic in the surrounding hills.

There are drink stands next to the castle ticket office and a new restaurant is planned next to the tourist office at the foot of the castle hill.

Getting There & Away

Ajlun is 73km northwest of Amman, and 22km northwest of Jerash. The castle can be clearly seen from most places in the area. If you're driving or walking, take the signposted road (Al-Qala'a St) heading west at the main roundabout in the centre of Ajlun.

From the centre of Ajlun, minibuses travel regularly to Jerash (300 fils, 30 minutes along

a scenic road) and Irbid (320 fils, 45 minutes). From Amman (500 fils, two hours), minibuses leave a few times a day from the Abdali bus station; an early start will let you see Ajlun and Jerash in one day, returning to the capital late in the afternoon.

AROUND AJLUN

The sights of Ajlun, Mar Elias and Ajlun Nature Reserve combine to make a fine day trip from Jerash, with the option of staying the night in Ajlun town or in the funky tree houses of the Ajlun Nature Reserve.

Mar Elias

مار الياس

The little-visited archaeological site of **Mar Elias** (admission free; ☎ 8am-7pm Apr-Oct, to 4pm Nov-Mar) gives you just the excuse you need to explore the countryside around Ajlun. It's not a spectacular site but can be part of an enjoyable day out by rented car.

The prophet Elias is mentioned in both the Quran and the Old Testament and is thought to have been born around 910 BC in the village of Lesteb, next to Mar Elias. The prophet died not far away in Wadi al-Kharrar (see p142), before ascending to heaven on a flaming chariot. During Byzantine times a pilgrimage site grew up around the place under the guidance of the nearby Bishopric of Pella. In 1999 excavations unearthed a church complex dating back to the early 7th century.

From the car park, stairs lead up above the ruins of the earliest church, the apse of which has a tree growing directly above it. The foundations of the main cross-shaped church are easy to make out and are decorated with wonderfully fresh floor mosaics partially covered by plastic. You can make out a lovely tree motif and an interesting swastika motif. Look for tomb chambers to the back right of the church and an earlier chapel with plain white tiles to the south. Water cisterns and bits of masonry dot the rest of the site.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

There's no public transport to the site and it's only really worth a visit if you have a car and can combine a trip to Qala'at ar-Rabad and the nearby nature reserve. From Ajlun take a right by the Qalet al-Jabal Hotel, climb the hill for 1km and take a left at the junction, heading downhill after this

for 2.7km. At the junction/army post take a right for another 1.8km until you see a signpost pointing left (the right branch leads to Ishfateena and the Ajlun Nature Reserve). After 1km take the left track for 400m up to the site (a total of 8.3km from Ajlun).

If you're headed on to Ajlun Nature Reserve take a left when you get back to the junction, 1.4km from the site, and head towards Ishfateena. After 1.6km you hit the main road; take a right here and after 5km you'll see the reserve signposted to the left, 300m before the main Irbid–Ajlun highway.

Ajlun Nature Reserve

حماية عجلون الطبيعية

Lost among the forests surrounding Ajlun is this small 13-sq-km **nature reserve** (☎ 02 6475672, ☎ /fax 6475673; adult JD3; 📅 15 Mar–31 Oct), established by the Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature (RSCN) in 1988 to protect oak, pistachio and strawberry forest, and to reintroduce the native but locally extinct roe deer (of which there are at least 13 in a captive breeding programme). Other local residents include wild boar, stone martens, polecats, jackals and even hyena and grey wolves.

The scenery is lovely (though not spectacular) and makes for a quiet break from Amman. Book accommodation and meals in advance with the RSCN through their Wild Jordan Centre in Amman (see p70). You should be able to catch sight of a roe deer in the large enclosure by the visitor centre.

There are two **hiking trails**. The 2km Roe Deer Trail (can be self-guided) takes about an hour and starts from the accommodation area, looping over a nearby hill, past a 1600-year-old stone wine press and lots of spring wildflowers (April), and returning via the roe deer enclosure. The Rockrose Trail is a longer trail of around 8km (four hours) that involves some scrambling and requires a guide (JD15 per group).

The reserve operates 10 **tented bungalows** (s/d/tr/q per person and entry fee JD20/17/16/15), which are comfortable and fun, on a tree-house-style wooden platform. A toilet and solar-heated shower block is a short walk away. Bring mosquito repellent between June and October.

Meals are available in the tented rooftop-restaurant given some notice (breakfast

JD3.500, lunch or dinner JD7) or you can cook for yourself on the public barbecue grills. From the rooftop there are great views of snowcapped Jebel ash-Sheikh (Mt Hermon; 2814m) on the Syria-Lebanon border.

Getting here is a bit of an adventure in itself; no public transport goes anywhere close. A one-way taxi from Ajlun (9km) costs around JD2.500; ask the reserve visitor centre to book one for your departure. If you're driving, take the road from Ajlun towards Irbid and take a left turn by a gas station 4.8km from Ajlun towards the village of Ishfateena. About 300m from the junction take a right and follow the signs a further 3.8km to the reserve, next to the village of Umm al-Yanabi.

DIBBEEN NATURE RESERVE

متنزة ديبين الوطني

☎ 02

This small area of Aleppo pine and oak forest is Jordan's most recent RSCN-managed nature reserve, established in 2004. Facilities are currently very limited and not yet on par with other RSCN reserves. Check with the RSCN before heading out here as new regulations or facilities might be in place.

There are some short, marked (but unmapped) **hiking** trails through the park. In March and April carpets of red crown anemones fill the meadows beneath the pine-forested and sometimes snowcapped hills. Most trails are either small vehicle tracks or stony paths, some of which continue beyond the park's boundaries. The area is very popular for local picnickers on Fridays and litter can be a problem.

In the middle of the park is **Dibbeen Rest House** (☎ 6339710; d/tr JD25/32), a tourist complex with a children's playground, restaurant and rest house. The comfortable 'chalets' (which sleep three) have a basic kitchen, large bathroom with hot water, TV and fan; it's worth negotiating. Visitors can pitch their own tent in the grounds for JD3 per person, and have access to toilets and hot showers.

Public transport here is very limited. From Jerash, the minibuses heading to the villages of Burma or Al-Majdal goes through the park and can drop you off within 1km of the tourist complex entrance – a detour to the complex can be arranged with the driver for an inducement of about JD1. Chartering a taxi from Jerash is the best idea, and will cost

about JD4 one way. If you're driving from Jerash, Ajlun or Amman, follow the initial signs close to Jerash and then ask directions to the Rest House; there are few signs.

IRBID

إربد

☎ 02 / pop 500,000

Irbid is a university town and, perhaps as a consequence, is one of the more lively and progressive of Jordan's large towns. In the area around Yarmouk University, south of the city centre, the streets are lined with outdoor restaurants, Internet cafés and pedestrians out strolling, particularly in the late afternoon. The university also hosts arguably Jordan's finest museum, the Museum of Archaeology & Anthropology.

The area around Irbid has yielded artefacts and graves suggesting that the area has been inhabited since the Bronze Age, although there is little evidence in the town of such antiquity. Jordan's second-largest city is nonetheless a good base from which to explore Umm Qais, Al-Himma and even Jerash, Ajlun and Pella.

Information

Irbid has plenty of banks for changing money and most have ATMs. The police station is above the market area, and offers great views of the city.

There are literally dozens of Internet cafés along the southern end of University St (Sha-feeq Rshaidat St) near Yarmouk University; most are open around 10am to 3am (some 24 hours) and charge 500 fils per hour.

Global Internet (500 fils per hour) The nearest Internet café to downtown; it's on the 2nd floor, in a plaza off King Hussein St.

Malkawi Express (☎ 7277876; King Hussein St)

A professional photo lab where you can buy and develop print film (750 fils plus 100 fils for each print) and print digital pictures (150 fils per print). King Hussein St is also known locally as Baghdad St.

Post office (King Hussein St; 📅 7.30am–5pm Sat–Thu, to 1.30pm Fri)

Royal Jordanian Airlines (☎ 7243202; cnr King Hussein & Al-Jaish Sts)

Sights

There are two museums in the grounds of the vast **Yarmouk University** (www.yu.edu.jo), which opened in 1977 and now boasts over 22,000 students from across the region. Foreigners are welcome to wander around

the university and it's a good place to meet young Jordanians.

The **Museum of Archaeology & Anthropology** (☎ 7271100, ext 4260; admission free; 📅 10am–1.45pm & 3–4.30pm Sun–Thu) is highly recommended and features exhibits from all eras of Jordanian history, including a great reconstruction of a traditional Arab pharmacy. The labels are in English. Out back is a Numismatic Hall with some surprisingly interesting displays on the history of money over the last 2600 years.

Jordan Natural History Museum (☎ 7271100; admission free; 📅 8am–5pm Sun–Thu) contains a range of stuffed animals, birds and insects, as well as rocks from the region, but very little is explained in English. It's good for birders, with some beautiful bee-eaters and rollers on display. The museum is in the huge green hangar No 23.

Beit Arar (off Al-Hashemi St; admission free; 📅 9am–5pm Sun–Thu) was set up to host cultural events and is located in a superb old Damascene-style house. The rooms are set around a courtyard paved with volcanic black stones and there are manuscripts and photo displays of Arar, one of Jordan's finest poets.

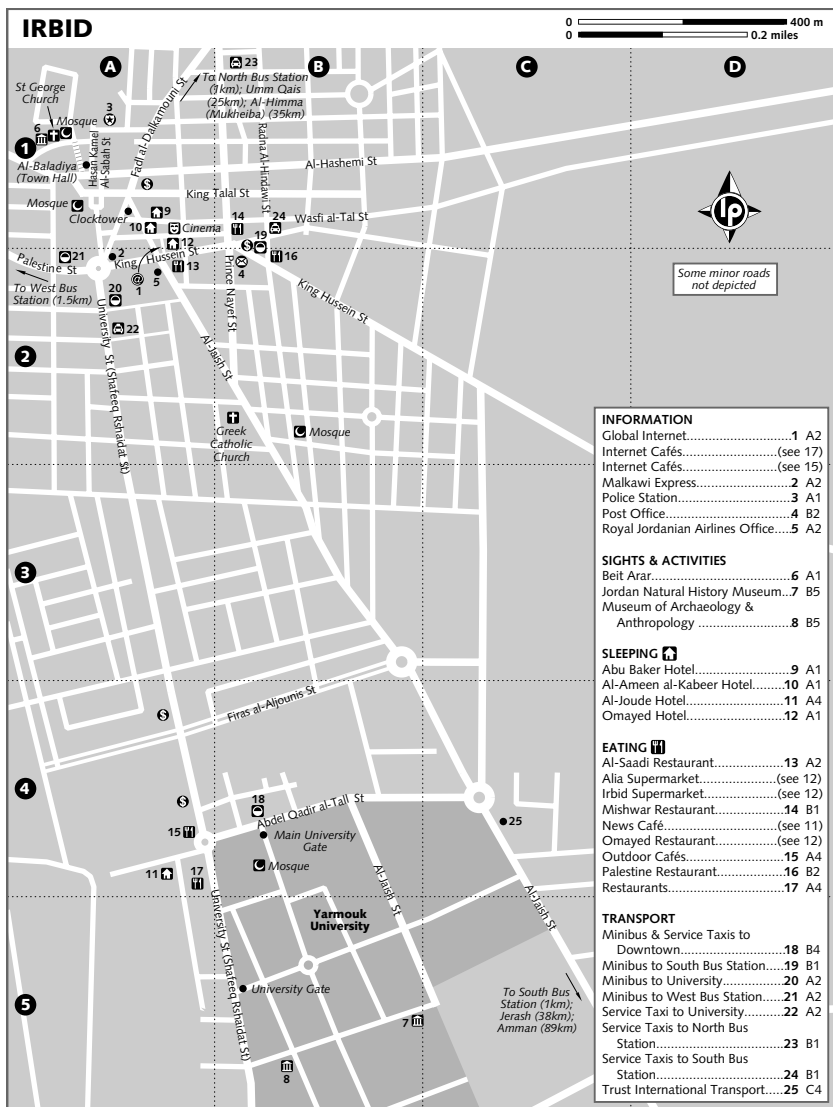
Sleeping

The cheapest hotels are in the city centre in the blocks immediately north of King Hussein (Baghdad) St.

Al-Ameen al-Kabeer Hotel (☎ 7242384; al_ameen_hotel@hotmail.com; Al-Jaish St; dm/s/d JD2/5/8) This is by far the best of the cheapies with friendly management, simple but well-tended rooms and clean shared bathrooms with a hot shower. The rooms overlooking the street can be noisy before 9pm but they are still the better option, though bear in mind that few of the windows lock. The three-bed dorms are men only.

Abu Baker Hotel (☎ 7242695; Wasfi al-Tal St; dm JD2) This is on the 2nd floor of the Bank of Jordan building and has a mostly local (male) clientele. The views over Irbid from the upper floor rooms are superb. There's no lift and only squat toilets. There's hot water in the shared bathroom, but only when you don't really need it (11am–8pm).

Omayed Hotel (☎ /fax 7245955; King Hussein St; s/d with private bathroom & satellite TV JD15/20) This is a cut above the cheapies in both price and quality, and, though it's a bit frumpy, the rooms are spacious, clean and most have nice views. Rooms at the back are quieter.



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The staff are friendly and it's a good place for women travellers.

Al-Joude Hotel (☎ 7275515; joude@go.com.jo; off University St; s/d/tr incl buffet breakfast JD25/35/45, ste JD60) This is Irbid's finest, located near the university, offering friendly staff, a classy ambience and attractive rooms which include private bathroom, satellite TV and a fridge.

An extra 35 rooms were added in 2005, pushing the hotel up to four stars. The restaurant here is decent, as is the downstairs News Café (see opposite).

Eating

There are dozens of restaurants to suit most budgets along the southern end of University

St. It's a great place in the evening when the street is crowded with young students. When we asked local university students which was their favourite place, most said 'it will change tomorrow', so, rather than recommend particular places, we suggest that you do what the locals do and stroll along the street until you find one that appeals; most have menus with prices posted outside. There are great cafés on the main roundabout northwest of the university that stay open late.

Al-Saadi Restaurant (☎ 7242454; King Hussein St; starters JD0.500-1.500, mains from JD2.500; ☎ 8.30am-9.30pm) This is one of the better places in the centre, with a pleasant dining area and decent service; they also have a breakfast menu, with cheese, omelette, fuul and moshabaha (hummus with whole chickpeas).

Omayed Restaurant (☎ 7240106; King Hussein St; starters from JD0.500, mains JD2-4; ☎ 8am-9.30pm) Another good choice, with reasonable food and nice décor. The window seats have great views over the city. Take the lift to the 3rd floor.

News Café (off University St; pizza JD2.500) Downstairs from the Al-Joude Hotel, this is a great place for Irbid's cool set to hang out. It's warm and inviting, offering coffee, milk shakes, pizza and other snacks, along with plenty of scented nargileh (water pipe).

Mishwar Restaurant (Wasfi al-Tal St) One of several choices in the centre of town for budget-priced felafel, shwarma and juices.

Palestine Restaurant (King Hussein St) Another decent cheapie but not much English spoken here.

Alia Supermarket (☎ 7245987; King Hussein St) A good option for self-caterers and picnickers, as is the next-door Irbid Supermarket. They're by the Omayed Hotel.

Getting There & Away

See p260 for details of service taxis from Irbid to Syria and p259 for buses from Irbid to Israel & the Palestinian Territories. For the latter, the office of **Trust International Transport** (☎ 7251878; Al-Jaish St) is near Al-Hasan Sports City. Trust also has three direct services a day to Aqaba (JD8, five hours).

Irbid is 85km north of Amman and easy to reach from just about anywhere in Jordan. There are three main minibus/taxi stations in town, a long way apart from each other.

From the North bus station, there are minibuses to Umm Qais (250 fils, 45 min-

utes), Mukheiba (for Al-Himma; 350 fils, one hour) and Quwayliba (for the ruins of Abila; 170 fils, 25 minutes).

From the large South bus station (New Amman bus station), air-conditioned Hijazi buses (900 fils, 90 minutes) leave regularly for Amman's Abdali bus station until about 7pm. To Amman (Abdali) there are also less comfortable buses and minibuses (600 fils, about two hours) and plenty of service taxis (900 fils). Minibuses also leave the South station for Ajlun (320 fils, 45 minutes) and Jerash (500 fils, 45 minutes). Buses go from here to Ramtha (250 fils), for the Syrian border.

From the West bus station (*Mujamma al-Gharb al-Jadid*), about 1.5km west of the centre, minibuses go to Al-Mashari'a (400 fils, 45 mins) for the ruins at Pella; Sheikh Hussein Bridge (for Israel & the Palestinian Territories; 750 fils, 45 minutes) and other places in the Jordan Valley, such as Shuneh ash-Shamaliyyeh (North Shuna; 270 fils, one hour).

Getting Around

Getting between Irbid's various bus stations is easy, with service taxis (120 fils) and minibuses (100 fils) shuttling between them and the centre. Service taxis and minibuses to the South bus station can be picked up on Radna al-Hindawi St, while for the North station head to Prince Nayef St. For the West station take a bus from Palestine St, just west of the roundabout.

The standard taxi fare from the centre (*al-Bilad*) to the university (*al-Jammiya*) is 500 fils; few taxis use meters in Irbid. A minibus from University St to the university gate costs 110 fils. Otherwise it's a 25-minute walk.

If you have a car be aware that the one-way roads and lack of parking can make driving a stressful experience.

ABILA (QUWAYLIBA) (أبيلَا (قويْلِبَا))

Possibly one of the Decapolis cities (see p109), the ancient city of **Abila** (admission free; ☎ daylight hr) was built in the Early Bronze Age (about 3000 BC) between two small hills, Tell Abila and Tell Umm-al-Amad.

There is, however, little to see because what was left after the earthquake in AD 747 remains largely unexcavated, so this is probably a site for the committed fan of remote ruins. Nothing is labelled or set up

for visitors and it can be hard to see what you're looking for without a guide, but there are enough **tombs** and eerie **caves** dotted around the fields to interest archaeology buffs. The **theatre** is fairly obviously carved out of the hill, and there are also some **columns** from the markets, temples and baths lying around the site.

The Abila site is close to the village of Quwayliba, about 15km north of Irbid. Buses leave from the North bus station in Irbid (170 fils, 25 minutes) for Quwayliba; ask the driver to drop you off at the ruins.

UMM QAIS (GADARA)

📍 02

And when he came to the other side, to the country of the Gadarenes, two demon-possessed met him, coming out of the tombs, so fierce that no one could pass that way. And behold, they cried out, "What have you to do with us, O Son of God? Have you come here to torment us before the time?" Now a herd of many swine was feeding at some distance from them. And the demons begged him, "If you cast us out, send us away into the herd of swine." And he said to them, "Go." So they came out and went into the swine; and behold, the whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the sea, and perished in the waters.

Matthew 8:28-32

In the northwest corner of Jordan are the ruins of another ancient town, Gadara (now called Umm Qais). The ruins are less visually impressive than at Jerash but in recompense you'll probably have the luxury of having the site to yourself. The ruins are interesting because of the juxtaposition of the ruined Roman city and a relatively intact Ottoman-era village. The site also offers awesome views over the Golan Heights (*Murtafa-at al-Jawlan*) in Syria and the Sea of Galilee (Lake Tiberias) in Israel & the Palestinian Territories to the north, and the Jordan Valley to the south.

According to the Bible, it was at Gadara that Jesus cast demons out of two men into a herd of pigs, and the site was an early Christian place of pilgrimage, although an

alternative Israeli site on the eastern shore of Lake Galilee also claims this miracle.

History

The ancient town of Gadara was captured from the Ptolemies by the Seleucids in 198 BC, and then the Jews under Hyrcanus captured it from them in 100 BC. Under the Romans, the fortunes of Gadara, taken from the Jews in 63 BC, increased rapidly and building was undertaken on a typically grand scale.

Herod the Great was given Gadara following a naval victory and he ruled over it until his death in 4 BC – much to the disgruntlement of locals who had tried everything to put him out of favour with Rome. On his death, the city reverted to semi-autonomy as part of the Roman province of Syria.

With the downfall of the Nabataean kingdom in AD 106, Gadara continued to flourish, and was the seat of a bishopric until the 7th century. By the time of the Muslim conquest, however, it was little more than a small village. Throughout the Ottoman period the village was substantially rebuilt.

In 1806 Gadara was 'discovered' by Western explorers and the local inhabitants claim to have formed the first government in Jordan, as well as signing the first agreement with the British in 1920. Excavations did not commence until 1982, when locals were finally repatriated to modern Umm Qais village. The site has recently been restored with German funding.

Information

The easiest way to enter ancient **Gadara** (admission JD1; 🕒 8am-5pm) is from the western end of the car park. The site is open 24 hours and there are no ticket checks.

There are a few signs in English. The brochure about Umm Qais published by the Jordan Tourism Board is useful; ask at the museum. *Umm Qais: Gadara of the Decapolis*, published by Al-Kutba (JD3), is ideal for anyone who wants further information. Guides (JD5 per 10 people) are also available at the ticket office in the car park.

There are toilets in the Umm Qais Resthouse. The tourist police are along the lane-way from the museum to the resthouse.

The souvenir shop just east of the parking area is run by the former site curator, who is a great source of informal information on the area's archaeology.

Sights

The first thing you come to from the south is the well-restored and brooding **west theatre**, which once seated about 3000 people. Like the north theatre, it was made from black basalt.

Just to the north is the **basilica terrace** complex, about 95m by 35m, with a **colonnaded courtyard** of lovely limestone, marble and basalt colours. The western section housed a row of **shops** (the shells of which remain), but the most interesting remains are of the 6th-century **church**, with an unusual octagonal interior sanctum, marked today by the remaining basalt columns. The church was destroyed by earthquakes in the 8th century.

You'll soon hit the **decumanus maximus**, the main road that once linked Gadara with other nearby ancient cities such as Abila and Pella, and eventually reached the Mediterranean coast.

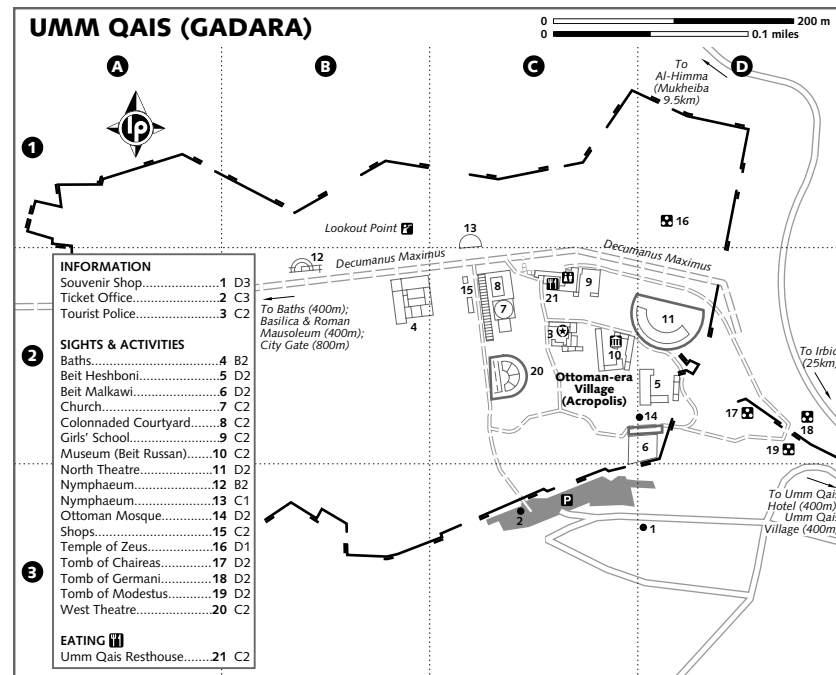
West along the decumanus maximus are the overgrown **baths**. Built in the 4th century, this was an impressive complex of fountains, statues and baths, but little remains after the

various earthquakes. Almost opposite is the decrepit **nymphaeum** (the eastern of the two nymphaeums).

The decumanus maximus continues west for another 1km or so, leading to some ruins of limited interest, including **baths**, **mausoleums** and **gates**. Japanese and Iraqi archaeologists are currently excavating here. Most interesting is the basilica built above a **Roman mausoleum**. You can peer down into the subterranean tomb through a hole in the basilica floor. The sarcophagus of Helladis that once lay here can be seen in the Museum of Anthropology & Archaeology in Irbid.

When you find yourself flagging, head back and grab a reviving drink at the Umm Qais Resthouse (p122), with its stunning views over Gallilee, the Golan and the snowcapped peaks of Lebanon beyond. You can see the minarets of al-Himmah below and the lakeshore city of Tiberias in the distance.

From the resthouse continue on to Beit Russan, a former residence of an Ottoman governor, and now a **museum** (📞 7500072; admission free; 🕒 8am-5pm Oct-Apr, to 6pm May-Sep). It is set around an elegant and tranquil



courtyard. The main mosaic on display (dating from the 4th century and found in one of the tombs) contains the names of early Christian notables and is a highlight, as is the headless, white marble statue of the Hellenic goddess Tyche, which was found sitting in the front row of the west theatre. Look out also for the wonderful carved basalt door. Exhibits are labelled in English and Arabic.

Surrounding the museum are the ruins of the **Ottoman-era village** dating from the 18th and 19th centuries and also known as the acropolis. If you have time and interest you can check out two intact houses, **Beit Malkawi** (now used as an office for archaeological groups) and the nearby **Beit Heshboni**. In the southeast corner is the **Ottoman mosque**, and in the far north are the remains of the **girls' school**.

Northeast of the museum is the **north theatre**, now overgrown and without its original black basalt rocks, which were cannibalised by villagers in other constructions.

Finally, around the eastern entrance from the main road are several tombs, including the **Tomb of Germani** and the **Tomb of Modestus**. About 50m further west, the **Tomb of Chaireas** dates from AD 154.

Sleeping & Eating

Umm Qais Hotel (☎ 7500080; s/d with shared bathroom JD6/12, with private bathroom 8/16) Few people spend the night in Umm Qais but this is a comfortable place on the main street of the modern village, about 400m west of the ruins. The simple rooms are clean, quiet and sunny, with 24-hour hot water, and the management is friendly. Guests can use the small kitchen or there's a small ground-floor restaurant and a rooftop café in summer.

Umm Qais Resthouse (☎ 7500555; www.romero-jordan.com; starters JD0.600-0.850, mains JD3-4.500, plus 26% tax; ☎ 10am-7pm, to 10pm Jun-Sep) Inside the ruins, this is a pleasant place to grab a glass of wine, kick back and savour the spectacular views. The restaurant is part of the Romero group and so both food and service are good. There's also a small crafts shop here.

A few basic eateries are scattered around the modern village; otherwise come prepared for a picnic in the ruins.

Getting There & Away

Umm Qais village, and the ruins a few hundred metres to the west, are about 25km

northwest of Irbid, and about 110km north of Amman. Minibuses leave Irbid's North bus station (250 fils, 45 minutes) on a regular basis. There's no direct transport from Amman.

With a car you can drive direct from Umm Qais to Pella along the Jordan Valley road, via the village of Adasiyyeh. The turn-off to the left is halfway to Al-Himma (below). The occasional minibus runs down this road to Shuneh ash-Shamaliyyeh but if you are relying on public transport to get to Pella you'll most likely have to backtrack to Irbid and take another minibus from there.

AL-HIMMA (MUKHEIBA)

الحمى (مخيبا)

☎ 02

The Al-Himma hot springs in the pleasant village of Mukheiba are worth a quick side trip from Umm Qais, especially in winter. Borderholics will get a buzz simply from being a stone's throw from the Golan Heights, currently occupied by Israel & the Palestinian Territories. In contrast to the bare, steeply rising plateau of the Golan to the north, the area is muggy, subtropical and lush and it can get very hot in summer. The springs, which reach about 33°C, were famous in Roman times for their health-giving properties and are still popular today.

The place is overrun with local tourists (mostly young men) on Friday and you may find accommodation full on Thursday and Friday nights.

Activities

The village's public **baths** (☎ 7500505; admission JD1; ☎ 8am-8pm) consist of three pleasant indoor hot pools and a dirtier and less popular outdoor pool. There are separate bathing times for men and women, which alternate every two hours. At the time of research men ruled the roost from 10am to noon, 2pm to 4pm and 6pm to 8pm, with women welcome at other times. The baths are on the right as you enter the village. There are rumours that a foreign company may upgrade the facilities, which will inevitably bring much higher fees.

Sleeping & Eating

Chalets (☎ 7500505; d/tr JD8/10, family apt JD25-35; ☎) The basic chalets overlooking the public baths are rundown and not much fun,

although the big balconies are a plus. The family-style apartments are more comfortable and come with a hot-water bathroom and air-conditioning.

Sah al-Noum Hotel (☎ 7500510; tr with private bathroom JD6) Has simple and bright triple rooms with a fan, squat toilet and shower, although some are cleaner than others. There's a large, shady restaurant and pleasant private bathing area out the back which is nice but not exactly the place to share a hot tub with that special someone. The hotel is signposted at the fork in the road near the public baths.

Al-Hameh Restaurant (☎ 7500512; starters from 400 fils, mains JD1.250-2.500, large beer JD1.750; ☎ 9am-8pm) The nice terrace overlooking the baths is a good place to grab some lunch, though there is not much going on here during weekdays.

Getting There & Away

Mukheiba is 10km north of Umm Qais, down the hill towards the Golan via a very scenic road. There are reasonably regular minibuses (100 fils, 15 minutes) between Mukheiba and Umm Qais on most days, with plenty on Friday. Direct minibuses from Irbid's North station (350 fils, one hour) also pass along the main street of Umm Qais.

Make sure you bring your passport as there's a military checkpoint just past the turn-off to the Umm Qais ruins. This is also a good place to hitch a ride.

SHUNEH ASH-SHAMALIYYEH (NORTH SHUNA)

الشونة الشمالية

☎ 02

This junction town also has a **hot springs complex** (admission JD1; ☎ 8am-9pm). Irbid locals say the springs are cleaner than those at

THE JORDAN VALLEY

Forming a part of the Great Rift Valley of Africa, the fertile valley of the Jordan River was of considerable significance in biblical times and is now the food bowl of Jordan.

The hot dry summers and short mild winters make for ideal growing conditions, and (subject to water restrictions) two or three crops are grown every year. Thousands of tonnes of fruit and vegetables are produced annually, with the main crops being tomatoes, cucumbers, melons and citrus fruits. You'll see dozens of greenhouses and nurseries as you travel through the valley.

The Jordan River rises from several sources, mainly the Anti-Lebanon Range in Syria, and flows down into the Sea of Galilee (Lake Tiberias), 212m below sea level, before draining into the Dead Sea. The actual length of the river is 360km, but as the crow flies the distance between its source and the Dead Sea is only 200km.

It was in the Jordan Valley, some 10,000 years ago, that people first started to plant crops and abandon their nomadic lifestyle for permanent settlements. Villages were built, primitive irrigation schemes were undertaken and by 3000 BC produce from the valley was being exported to neighbouring regions, much as it is today.

The Jordan River is highly revered by Christians because Jesus was baptised in its waters by John the Baptist at the site of Bethany-Beyond-the-Jordan (see p141). Centuries earlier, Joshua led the Israelite armies across the Jordan near Tell Nimrin (Beth Nimrah in the Bible) after the death of Moses, marking the symbolic transition from the wilderness to the land of milk and honey.

And while all Israel were passing over on dry ground, the priests who bore the ark of the covenant of the Lord stood on dry ground in the midst of the Jordan, until all the nation finished passing over the Jordan.

Joshua 3: 17

Since 1948 the Jordan River has marked the boundary between Jordan and Israel & the Palestinian Territories, from the Sea of Galilee to the Yarbis River. From there to the Dead Sea marked the 1967 cease-fire line between the two countries; it now marks the continuation of the official frontier with the Palestinian Territories.

During the 1967 War with Israel, Jordan lost the West Bank and the population on the Jordanian east bank of the valley dwindled from 60,000 before the war to 5000 by 1971. During the 1970s, new roads and fully serviced villages were built and the population has now soared to over 100,000.

Al-Himma and they're cheaper, but they're not as well set up.

There are simple **chalets** (☎ 6587189; chalet for 4 persons JD30) in the complex, as well as a shady restaurant, although the sulphur smell can be a little overpowering.

Shuneh ash-Shamaliyyeh is accessible by minibus from Irbid (West bus station; 270 fils; 45 minutes) and has connections to anywhere along the Jordan Valley road (Hwy 65), including to Al-Mashari'a (for Pella) and Deir Alla.

PELLA (TAQABAT FAHL)

📍 02

In the midst of the Jordan Valley are the ruins of the ancient city of Pella (Taqabat Fahl), one of the 10 cities of the Decapolis (see p109). Although not as spectacular as Jerash, Pella is far more important to archaeologists because it has revealed evidence of 6000 years of settlement, from the Stone Age through to medieval Islamic ruins.

Many of the ruins are spread out and in need of excavation, so some walking and imagination are required to get the most

from the site. That said, the setting is superb and there are some fine views over the Jordan Valley.

History

Pella was inhabited as early as 5000 BC, and Egyptian texts make reference to it in the 2nd millennium BC.

Pella really only flourished during the Greek and Roman periods. The Jews largely destroyed Pella in 83 BC because the inhabitants were not inclined to adopt the customs of their conquerors. It was to Pella that Christians fled persecution from the Roman army in Jerusalem in the 2nd century AD.

The city reached its peak during the Byzantine era, and by AD 451 Pella had its own bishop. The population at this time may have been as high as 25,000. The defeat of the Byzantines by the invading Islamic armies near Pella in 635 was quickly followed by the knockout blow at the Battle of Yarmouk (near modern Mukheiba) the next year.

Until the massive earthquake that shook the whole region in 747, Pella continued to prosper under the Umayyads. Archaeological finds show that even after the earthquake the city remained inhabited on a modest scale. The Mamluks occupied it in the 13th and 14th centuries, but afterwards Pella was virtually abandoned.

Information

The **site** (admission free) is officially open 8am to 6pm, but if the main entrance is closed, you can enter via the Pella Rest House on the hill.

Anyone with a specific interest should buy *Pella*, published by Al-Kutba (JD3) and available in major bookshops around Jordan.

Sights

THE RUINS

At the base of the main mound (on your right as you enter through the main entrance) are the limited remains of a **Roman gate** to the city. Atop the hill are the ruins of an **Umayyad settlement**, which consisted of shops, residences and storehouses. The small, square **Mamluk mosque** to the west dates from the 14th century. Carved into the south side of the hill is the recently excavated **Canaanite temple**, which was constructed in around 1270 BC and dedicated to the Canaanite god Baal.

The main structure, and indeed one of the better preserved of the ruins at Pella, is the Byzantine **civic complex church** (or **middle church**), which was built atop an earlier Roman civic complex in the 5th century AD and modified several times in the subsequent two centuries. Adjacent is the **odeon** (a small theatre used for musical performances). It once held 400 spectators, but you will need considerable imagination to picture this now. East of the civic complex church are the low-lying remains of a Roman **nymphaeum**.

Up the hill to the southeast is the 5th-century **east church**, which is in a lovely setting. From there a trail leads down into Wadi Malawi and then climbs **Tell al-Husn** (note the remains of tombs cut into the hillside), atop which are the stones of a **Byzantine fort** and **Roman temple**. There are good views of the Jordan Valley from here.

Outside the main site, there are the ruins of a small **Abbasid settlement** about 200m north of the main entrance. There are also a few limited **Palaeolithic ruins** (4km), **Roman baths** and a **rock bridge** (3km) reached via the road past the turn-off to the Pella Rest House.

Also, ask at the rest house how to get to the rubble of a **Hellenistic temple** high on Jebel Sartaba to the southeast; from there, Jerusalem is visible on a clear day. Figure on a couple of hours for the return hike.

A **Geology & Palaeontology Museum** (www.pella-museum.org) has been planned for a while now on a site behind the rest house. The museum is the brainchild of famous Jordanian architect Ammar Khammash, but construction had been put on hold during our latest visit.

Sleeping & Eating

Pella Countryside Hotel (☎ 079 5574145; fax 6560899; s/d half board JD20/25) The manager of the Pella Rest House runs this B&B from the back of his house. It has a lovely family feel and a nice outlook towards the ruins. From February to May, black irises, the national flower of Jordan, bloom in the owner's garden. The seven rooms are well kept, with private bathroom and hot shower. Tea and coffee

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are complementary and it's well signposted on the road to the site. It's a good place to kick back for a few days and the family can arrange picnics in the surrounding hills.

Pella Rest House (☎ 079 55574145; meals JD6, beer JD2.500; ☒ noon-7pm) Commands exceptional views over Pella and the Jordan Valley; Israel & the Palestinian Territories is visible to the right of the communications towers, the West Bank is to the left, and the Jenin Heights and Nablus are in the middle. Chicken and fresh St Peter's fish (from the Jordan River) are the order of the day and the food is good.

Getting There & Away

From Irbid's West bus station, minibuses go to Al-Mashari'a (400 fils, 45 minutes); get off before Al-Mashari'a at the junction. Pella is a steep 2km walk up from the signposted turn-off but you should be able to find a seat in a minibus up to town (100 fils) or the rest house (250 fils). Check the price first as many of these unlicensed drivers are sharks. There is no direct transport from Amman.

With your own car you can take the newly built back roads to Ajlun (25km), but is best to get good directions from the rest house before setting off.

DEIR ALLA

The conical mound of Deir Alla, 35km north of Shuneh al-Janubiyeh (South Shuna), is one of those places that's more interesting to read about than actually visit. It was first settled around 1500 BC as an early temple, market and cult centre, and is thought to have been the biblical town of Succoth, before it was destroyed in 1200 BC. Various finds from the site are on display in the museum at Salt.

A notice board at the base of the ruins has some limited explanations, or you could ask at the Antiquities Office across the road. The site can be combined with Pella in a day trip from Irbid or Ajlun. Minibuses run along the Jordan Valley road and pass right by the ruins.

