

As-Salt: The Middle East's city of tolerance and generosity

Part 02

"As-Salt became a meeting place between east and west, between the desert and the urban centres," said Ayman Abu Rumman, former director of tourism at the local Balqa governorate (one of Jordan's 12 governorates), adding that the city's diversity is reflected in its architecture.

The best example of the city's blend of Ottoman styles, European influences and local traditions might be the **sumptuous** Abu Jaber House, built in local limestone with Italian frescoed ceilings, **Art Nouveau** stained glass windows, ornamented columns and ceramic tiles from Syria.

SUMPTUOUS /'sʌmptʃuəs/ *adj.*: (formal) very expensive and looking very impressive
A sumptuous meal

ART NOUVEAU /ɑ:(t) nu:'vəʊ/





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The house belonged to Abu Jaber, a wealthy merchant family who settled in As-Salt at the end of the 19th Century. In 2009, the building was converted into a museum that takes visitors through the history and traditions of the Ottoman town.

When Amman was chosen the capital of the Emirate of Transjordan in 1928, As-Salt lost its regional importance. **Spared** the intense urbanisation of Amman, As-Salt has managed to retain its character.

SPARE *verb*: (formal) to allow sth to escape harm or damage
During the bombing only was house was spared.

For Jordanian architect Rami Daher, who prepared the city's nomination file for World Heritage listing, the city is unique not just because of the historic limestone buildings, but also because of the way it has preserved traditions of hospitality and tolerance over the centuries.

"The topography of the city has **fostered** a sense of community and proximity.

Neighbours live very close to each other and support each other in many different ways," he said.

FOSTER *verb*: encourage, promote

The club's aim is to foster better relations within the community..

A network of interlinked stairways, shared courtyards and public squares has encouraged the development of a tolerant, **multi-faith** society and brought a sense of belonging to a shared space. Most of the traditional buildings feature communal courtyards or terraces where neighbours can cook, eat and drink together.

MULTI-FAITH adj.: involving or characterized by a variety of religions.

"People here still live like they are part of the same family, there is no segregation between them," said Abu Rumman as we sat together in a room at the Abu Jaber museum with a panoramic view of the city's mountains.

He gestured towards the square across from the museum, where elderly men from different backgrounds meet every day to play rounds of backgammon and manqala, an ancient board game popularised by the Ottomans. He then pointed to the mosque and church in front of it.



rounds of backgammon

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- Backgammon is a member of the large family of tables games whose history can be traced back nearly 5,000 years to archaeological discoveries in the Jiroft culture, of Persia.



manqala





Manqala

- Evidence of the game was uncovered in Israel in the city of Gadera in an excavated Roman bathhouse where pottery boards and rock cuts were unearthed dating back to between the 2nd and 3rd century AD. Among other early evidence of the game are fragments of a pottery board and several rock cuts found in Aksumite areas in Matara (in Eritrea) and Yeha (in Ethiopia), which are dated by archaeologists to between the 6th and 7th centuries AD.

"The church is facing the mosque and they share the same entrance," he said.

"Muslims and Christians participate in each other's celebrations. They share what they have with their neighbours."

This is perhaps most evident in the city's oldest church. Built in 1682 around a cave where it is said Saint George appeared to a shepherd, the church is known in Arabic as Al-Khader, an Islamic figure **syncretised** with Saint George in the region.

SYNCRETISE /'sɪŋkɹɪtɪz/ verb: attempt to amalgamate or reconcile (differing things, especially religious beliefs, cultural elements, or schools of thought).

The Amish communities of today have syncretized many traditional elements of their material culture with elements in the New World.

The church's **vaulted** stone interior is full of icons and mosaics that depict Saint George slaying dragons, and what remains of the cave is visited by people from different background who come to light candles and leave handwritten wishes.

VAULTED *adj.*: (of a building or room) having an arched roof



"Christians and Muslims both go there to pray, everyone is welcome," said Sabreen Dababneh, who works in the neighbouring Orthodox Church, Dormition of Virgin Mary. Dababneh told me this **interfaith** harmony is what makes As-Salt so special.

INTERFAITH *adj.*: relating to or involving different religions or members of different religions
Action to encourage interfaith dialogue

"The church keeper who works with me, Ali, is a Muslim," she said. "There are no differences between us. We live here as brothers and sisters."

