

Jordan's Jabal Al Qala'a, the Citadel, a new culture destination

By Emily Lodge

King Abdullah and Queen Rania entered quietly as the night sky darkened over al Qasr, the Umayyad palace on the high plateau that dates to 7500BCE. A newly re-born Jordan Festival was inaugurated last night kicking off summer events on a new modern stage nestled within the famous archaeological site of one of Amman's seven hills, Jabal Al Qala'a, or the Citadel, in downtown Amman.

Amal Maher, an Egyptian singer accompanied by Salim Sahhab's orchestra, paid tribute to Oum Koulthoum, a new take on a voice that mesmerized audiences in the '50s and '60s. During the '67 war, Koulthoum is said to have "anesthetized" the arab world to their suffering so she would seem to be an appropriate start for a country in a region surrounded by war. Ms. Maher, who appeared in a long green sequined bodice with a ruffle of flowing pleated silk, apparently caught the eye of Prime Minister Samir Rifai and Minister of Tourism Maha Khaatiib, last year at Lebanon's Beiteddine festival. It was hoped that by working with the Beiteddine festival this year, Amman would be able to attract internationally recognized artists and draw more than 50,000 people, while at the same time lessening the financial expense of bringing them to Jordan. "What we needed," commented Souha Bawab, executive director, "in order to put the focus this year on Amman was a new stage (costing over one million JD) thirty meters deep to accommodate such performers and orchestras."

It is all part of a larger plan to draw tourists to Amman on their way to other archaeological sites-- Petra, Jerash, Mt. Nebo, the Baptism site, Wadi Rum and Aqaba. Investors believe that they can best help the economy by investing in the performing arts which could lengthen the stay of a tourist longer than the average 4 nights/5 days. Yassin Talhouni, another investor, and Vice-Chairman of the Festival, whose Zara Group hotels manages the Movenpick, the Intercontinental, and the Hyatt, commented, "This is all about attracting more cultural tourism to Amman and increasing the average length of stay."

The other twelve events planned at the site (referred to in the Bible as Rabbath Ammon), through August 30th were chosen for their "diversity", according to Azzam Fakhridden, one of the thirteen committee members whose restaurants are among the best in Amman. "The events are not traditional, nor commercial and have been chosen by the committee to attract diverse and numerous audiences. Some are typically Arab, some are pop, some are young and hip but what they all have in common is a bit of class."

A case in point is Pink Martini, a jazz/salsa group, with lyrics in English, French and Italian, recently seen on David Letterman, due to appear on July 4th followed by Il Divo, four tenors, Spanish-French-Italian, put together by US producer Simon Cowell, producer of American Idol, on July 9th. Flamenco night, on the 15th will feature Rafael Amargo, considered as one of this year's "best" flamenco dancer and on July 18, Kathem Al Saher, "the emperor of Arab music" is featured.

July 12th brings a more local focus with Jordan Rock Night: a Jordanian talent

agent culled these three up and coming rock groups. The committee invested a lot to bring The Palestinian Youth Orchestra on July 28th, an 81-member troupe from the Palestinian diaspora all over the world as well as leading musicians from Europe and North America. The Trio Khoury and Nawajazz, on Aug. 8, is on the cutting edge of a new wave with Arab and French musicians blending classical oriental and Arab music (on oud and bass) with western jazz influence. The August 26th act featuring popular Iraqi singer “Farida” and the Maqam Ensemble, will hopefully appeal, among others, to the many Iraqi refugees living in Jordan.

Every July and August since 1981 when Queen Noor Al-Hussein first inaugurated the Jordan festival, the Greco-Roman city of Jerash as well as rose city of Petra have been the premiere showcases for Jordanian artists as well as international artists such as Placido Domingo (2009). What differentiates it from past summers is that “it is the first time the private sector has adopted it and every sector—banking, logistics, catering—has donated time and money for the love of culture and country,” according to Fakhridin. Tickets prices range from 10JD to 150JD.

The Jordanian private sector has been working with the Ministry of Tourism to broaden Jordan’s image beyond its many World Heritage historical sites to become a major year-round performing arts destination. After Petra became one of the new seven wonders of the world, tourist receipts grew to 2.1 billion dollars in 2009 with over 5.5 million visitors. But with the current economic crisis, the government did not see it growing appreciably more than that without the help of private sector. Thirteen leading business men and women stepped in to meet the challenge which has “not one line item” in the Jordanian government’s budget.

The end goal is four festivals a year, with a Canadian ballet company to appear in the fall and in addition, creating a site in Petra as well as in Jerash for a more oriental emphasis including the show, Petra Rocks. “Lebanon has four festivals a year, and basically we were jealous,” Azzam Fakhreddin remarked at a press conference and quickly walked away.

“Until five years ago,” according to one cultural aficionado, “there was nothing in Amman. Now there is the Royal Film Commission, Al Balaad Theatre, the Children’s Museum, and the Video Club, among other things.” While some would argue that Amman still has a long way to go, James Watt, the UK Ambassador to Jordan, begs to differ: “This is the best thing that’s happened to Amman—it is professionally planned with great care bringing together a host of high quality acts and founding a tradition worthy of Amman as a city whose cultural life is flourishing.”