

Egypt & Jordan – A Cultural Guide

by Stefanie Elkins (updated June 2021)

(Additional sources from Lonely Planet Publications, Insight Guides, and Egyptian & Jordanian Depts. of Tourism)



Middle Eastern Culture

The Middle East is built on a magnificent legacy of civilizations dating back to the very beginning of written human history. Science, the arts, written language, mathematics, a legal system, and other characteristics of civilization flourished in ancient Sumer, Persia, Egypt, and other parts of the Middle East, including Jordan, leaving a lasting influence on the later cultures of Greece and Rome. Today the Middle East, in spite of recent conflicts, continues to offer the world a rich cultural contribution, as home to three major world religions, a vibrant cultural and artistic life, a fascinating tradition of folkloric music and dance, and a growing economic power base.

Arab traditions of hospitality and kindness are deeply ingrained into the very souls of most Jordanians, especially the Bedouin. Rooted in the harsh realities of life in the desert, these traditions have been virtually codified into all social behavior. Traditional notions of hospitality mixed with a sense of modern culture and fun sense of humor make the Bedouin easy to get along with.

Egyptians are deeply religious, be they Copt or Muslim, and they govern their lives based on these religious principles. Combined with this is a concern and commitment to their extended families. All family members are equally responsible for the reputation and integrity of the family, as well as for the behavior of other members. Contrary to what many of us may believe, this strong family unit creates a rather safe environment for tourists. The amount of crime, violent or otherwise, is negligible compared with most Western countries. Most visitors to this part of the world often return surprised with their new outlook on personal safety in the Middle East. Statistically speaking most major cities in Egypt and Jordan are going to be quite safe to walk through at any hour of the day or night when compared to a major city in America. Nonetheless, many Westerners visitors are still somewhat understandably apprehensive. One must realize however, that most of our views on Arabs and Muslims in general are based on what we hear in the media. Quite often this news is disturbing and gives the average American the viewpoint that all Arab nations and therefore Arab people, are unsafe.

Sharing deep ethnic and cultural ties with both Palestine and Iraq, many Jordanians and Egyptians are frustrated and at times even angered by American and European policies towards the Middle East. Nevertheless, they are always able to differentiate a government and its policies from its people. Regardless of where you come from, you'll rarely be greeted with animosity in Jordan or Egypt, but rather with courtesy and hospitality that is deeply impressive and often quite humbling.

Since most Egyptians & Jordanians have been raised in a social environment steeped in Islam, their thought processes and decisions can sometimes confuse Westerners. Yet it is precisely this Islamic upbringing that makes many Middle Easterners the most charming and helpful of hosts.

A Developing Region

It may surprise some that Jordan and Egypt are considered developing countries. The capital cities appear flourishing and you will see many well dressed and productive people. The disparity between rich and poor however is apparent and you will see this in both countries. In both Egypt and Jordan, gypsies live in makeshift tents and huts and piles of trash can abound in certain areas.

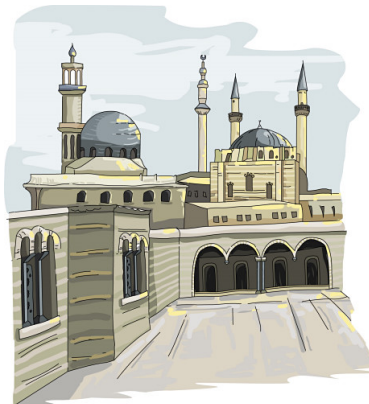
The concept of environmental responsibility is lost on populations who are just trying to survive. The lack of care about cultural heritage is also a problem, especially in Jordan where children are taught very little about their rich history thus resulting in generations who do not really care about their ancient sites.

Even though Jordan and Egypt are considered developing countries however, you will be able to find pretty much anything you need if you forgot something.

Religious and Moral Norms

You will actually find some similarities in the true practice of Islam to those of many Christians. In addition to the Islamic belief that alcohol should be avoided, the faithful also do not eat pork (considered unclean) or use drugs. They are also inflexible when it comes to pornography – explicit sexual materials such as magazines, photos, tapes, or records, are illegal and likely to be confiscated.

Most locals are quite accommodating; they'll go out of their way to respond to questions and help you in any way. You'll discover that many locals might stand a little closer to you than you're used to when carrying on a conversation. You'll also notice that sometimes you will draw a crowd every time you strike up a conversation with a local. This can be especially true if you are female! But take it in stride; smile and thank them graciously for their comments about your flowing hair and gleaming teeth and be on your way.



Social Responsibility as a Tourist

It's important to remember that we are guests in a foreign country. This means respecting the culture and beliefs of an Islamic people even if we don't always agree with certain practices. Our respect can be shown in many simple ways that will help dispel the all too often misunderstandings between Arabs and Americans. I've mentioned attitudes towards women and the conservativeness of lifestyle. The locals will also notice the way you choose to dress and simple modesty (often lacking with many tourists) will result in a much happier, less harassed time during your trip.

Another point to mention is the expected conduct if we visit mosques or churches. Major mosques, especially those amenable to tourism, are open to the public unless services are in progress (the main service is on Friday at noon). Some other mosques are never open at all to the public. Please keep in mind that a mosque differs from a western church in that Christian churches are considered houses of God, while mosques are more a gathering place for the faithful of Islam. Women and men are segregated and it is important to be respectful and reverent in these places of worship.

All visitors to mosques must remove their shoes. Hence, most Muslims walk around in their socks. Also, women must cover their bare arms and sometimes wear a veil. At some mosques, a hooded cape may be provided for women to wear. No shorts are allowed in mosques by men or woman.



The Political Situation

With an increase in terrorism over the past decade and rise of ISIS/ISIL (Arabs know them as Daesh) it is understandable that tensions are high between the Middle East and West. As a result, it is best to avoid engaging in religious or political discussions with locals. Proselytizing IS illegal in Egypt and Jordan and this may include overt expressions about the political situation as well as opinionated expressions about Islam. However, locals are very interested in what Americans think about their country and its politics and you will likely be asked questions. Use your discretion and reply thoughtfully when asked about Trump (whom most dislike), Biden, ISIS, etc. Remember that most Egyptians and Jordanians regardless of religion, have very strong opinions about American politics derived from the media. Undoubtedly you will find that many of them are more well informed than most Americans! These are small countries who are very concerned about our politics as they are affected by it in ways that we often do not experience.



Attitudes Towards Woman & Dress

Some of the biggest misunderstandings between Arabs and Westerners occur over the issue of woman. Half-truths and stereotypes exist on both sides: many Westerners assume all Arab women are veiled, or repressed victims, while a large number of Arabs see Western women as immoral and sexually promiscuous. For many Arabs of both genders, the role of a woman is specifically defined; she is the mother and matron of the household. The man is the provider. However, don't let this generalization mislead you. Thousands of middle and upper class professional women of the Middle East juggle work and family responsibilities just like us in America. Among the working classes however, adherence to tradition is stronger and this class makes up the majority of the population.

When it comes to the hijab, or head scarf that you will see most Muslim women wearing, one must understand that for most women in Egypt and Jordan this is a personal choice. After 9/11 we saw an increase in the conservatism of women's attire in Jordan with the most obvious being that nearly all young women chose to take up the hijab in order to separate themselves from a Western identity. Ironically, this was and still is a source of contention even among family members where one sister chooses to wear the hijab and others do not. I have even talked to Muslim men who have adamantly stated that they do not want their daughters wearing the hijab. Good friends of ours in Jordan who are devout Muslims, the mother wearing hijab, have stated that they are leaving the choice of hijab up to their young daughters when the time comes.

The issue of sexual promiscuity and immorality among Americans can be attributed mainly to the influences of American TV and movies (Baywatch is still a favorite believe it or not). While we are used to this "Hollywood mentality" one must realize that many Arabs interpret this as the way all Western women behave. Sometimes unwanted attention towards Western women can cause friction and unease on the part of the tourist. Therefore, how you dress can dramatically affect how you are treated. If you choose to wear form fitting tank tops or shorter shorts (which may be considered perfectly acceptable in the States), the locals may assume that you are a "Miley Cyrus" or "Kim Kardashian" and treat you accordingly.

While traditional Islam forbids premarital sex for both genders, the presence of foreign women presents, in the eyes of some Arab men, a chance to get around those traditions with ease and without consequence. While serious physical harassment is quite rare, a foreign woman is likely to receive, at the very least, some verbal harassment in the form of annoying comments to get your attention. Comments can range from exultations on your exquisite beauty to corny pick up lines like, "Your hair is like the setting sun flowing from heaven", to more embarrassing comments about your body.

It is for the above reasons that I recommend ladies dress a bit more conservatively than you might in the States. In general, loose garments will be cooler anyway. The more you try to fit in and respect the cultural norms of modesty, the more enjoyment you will get out of your interactions with the local people who can be some of the nicest you will ever meet. Here are some tips that should make your trip more comfortable:

- Keep a respectable distance. Some men, usually the young ones, unused to close interaction with woman not in their family can misconstrue even innocent friendly talk as flirtation. This is usually only an issue in crowded markets.
- If possible, have your husband or another man with you when you go out shopping in the markets.
- Wear a wedding band. Generally speaking, Arab men seem to have more respect for a married woman.
- As Egypt is a lot more relaxed and accepting of Western dress due to all the tourism, sleeveless tanks and shorts are fine. Avoid Daisy Dukes however (ultra short shorts). Some women prefer skirts or skorts as they are cooler.
 - In Jordan, with the exception for Petra, it is preferable for ladies to wear pants, capris, and shirts with sleeves (short or cap is fine).
- Don't respond to obnoxious comments.