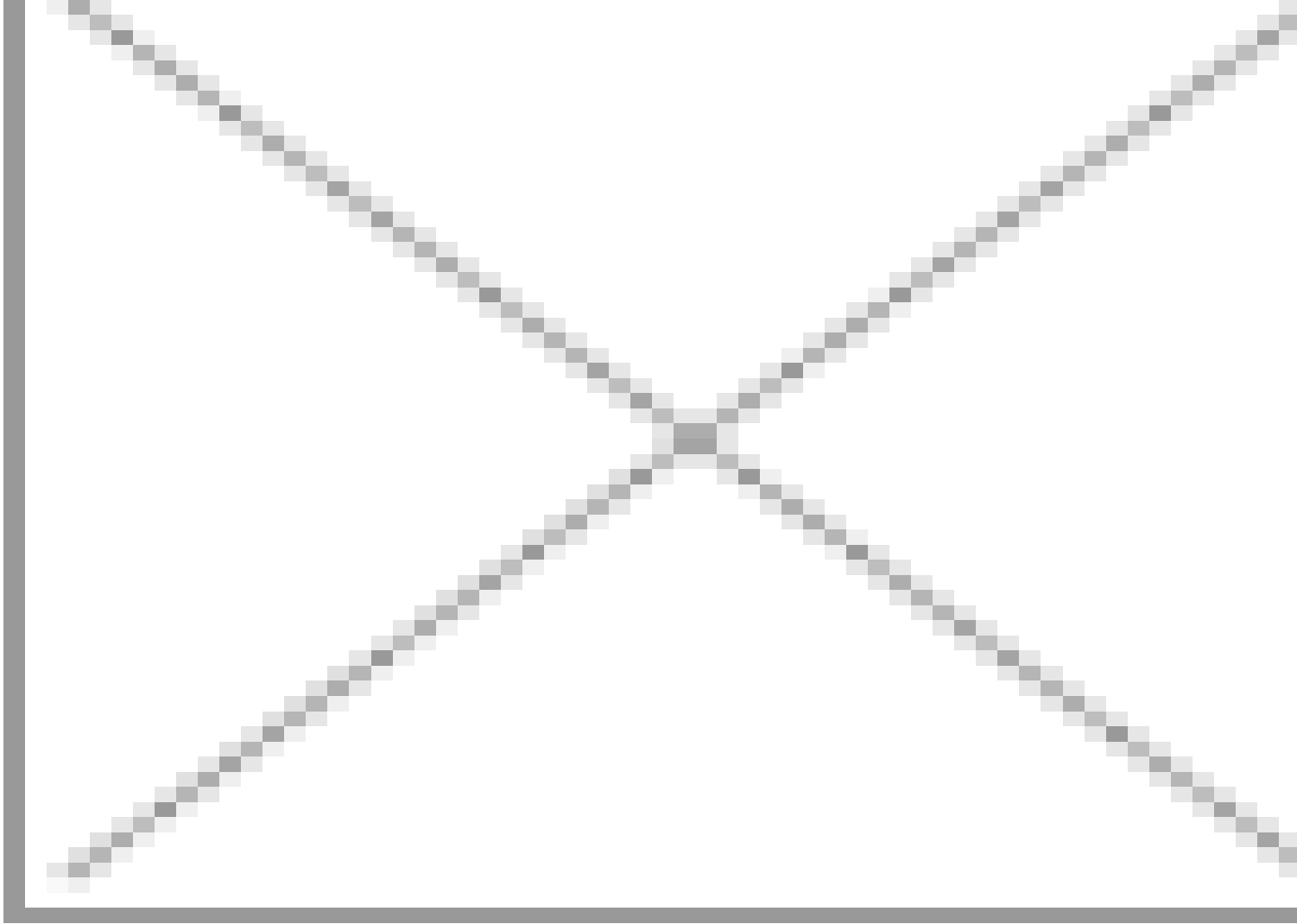


Gardens in the Shade

By Ammar Khammash, The Jordan Times Weekender - September 2002

Today, very little of the traditional town of Maan has survived. Only about 30 years ago almost the complete town was of mud brick. Architecturally, Maan represents the end of the mountainous Mediterranean construction, which uses rubble or dressed stone, and the beginning of the desert architecture that uses sun-dried mud brick. The town's location at the end of Bilad Al-Sham and the beginning of Hijaz was literally translated in the physical layout of its two parts: the Shami Maan to the north and the Hijazi Maan to the south. Each part has a population that also, to some degree, reflected this division.

While each of the two Maans had its own garden in the past, only the gardens of the north have retained some of their original character. The southern gardens were almost completely demolished by a mighty flood after torrential rain in 1966. The gardens, as well as the town, are blessed by all the hydrological characteristics of an oasis; where the underground water naturally emerges on the surface or gets very close so that trees can reach it with their roots. In the gardens of Maan the water table is high enough to allow the irrigation of vegetables from shallow wells. Such wells were dug and lined-up with circular stone walls to retain the gardens' earth and keep it from caving in. water was pumped up the few meters using a tree trunk mantled to the side of the well like a seesaw with a heavy stone on the short arm and a water bucket on the longer arm that extends into the well.



All of the gardens were walled. High walls created amazing alleys some as narrow as to allow only one person to pass, and were almost completely closed from the top by the thick branches of pomegranate and plums trees and their hanging fruits. One narrow passage is keeping solid shade, which is on the brink of complete darkness, something that is a rarity in the desert blaze of Maan. The trees of these gardens are important for they have adapted for centuries to this climate. They are living history, shedding light on the farming of desert oases during the Ottoman period and on the variety of fruits that were sold in the markets of Maan as often mentioned by early travelers and pilgrims.

With their intricately woven walls, these gardens create a fabric of small plots and a web of passages. Some of the plots are so small ?5m x 5m? that with the high parameter walls, they appear like a room, an indoor space full of shady trees and privacy. Adding to the privacy is the way Maanis made the doors of their gardens. Traditionally, doors were only large enough for one person; bending or almost crawling in. Such doors would have a few stones protruding out of the wall to provide steps from the outside up to the door which often was elevated. On the inside, a ladder would be used to descend into the cool earth floor of the garden. For a non-Maani these doors would have definitely been misinterpreted as closed windows.

Other than walls the gardens have some bridges that spanned water creeks, some water channels and, most interestingly, some houses. To avoid occupying a large area in such small gardens, houses were often built in the form of towers. Such vertical stacking would result in the minimal footprint. The result is architecture very reminiscent of Yemen or south Morocco.

Hardly any of such structures are still standing and, alas, Jordan has lost a very rare element of its oasis features, an element that was hardly documented.

Ma'an is a one or two-day destination, and can be combined with Shobak, Petra or Wadi Rum. The straight-line drive on the Desert Highway is relaxing. Maan town has a clearly signed exit a bit further than 200 km from Amman. A photogenic destination for those looking for intense Arabian flavor. The Bedouin market in the southeastern end of the town is the best place in Jordan to buy your 20-meter-long goat hair tent.

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