

Leisure time

By Patricia O'Callaghan

A British Airways crew from the 1960s has left a mark on Amman nightlife, maybe. Some believe there is good reason for the Monday 'big night out' phenomenon: Back in the '60s, there was one flight a week from London to Amman. It would arrive on Mondays and the British Airways stewardesses and flight crew would stay in Amman's Shepherd Hotel. The crew would always drink in the hotel's pub that night and soon word spread of pretty women drinking there. So the crowds began to arrive, with locals from the capital arriving in their throngs. Soon, the Shepherd pub became so popular and full that the overflow started going to other, new pubs.

And so the Monday night phenomenon was born, some would say, and continues to this day.

GROWING UP

Jordan is a young country and Amman is a young city. It's young in two ways. After only being established in the 1920s, the country is still beginning to shape itself. Jordan's cultural life really only began to develop in the 1970s. The country also has a very young population, with some 70% of its people aged under 34 years.

Because of this, life in Jordan is changing fast. People everywhere agree that the past few years have seen Jordan, and in particular the capital, grow and develop further.

A third important aspect for Jordan is its location. A lot of external people are shaping this country. Country borders do not stop culture from flowing into landlocked Jordan, according to Fady Ghazal from OrangeRed. Stable Jordan has always been a magnet for people leaving behind conflict in neighbouring countries and a lot of their influences merge in this intercultural city. Palestinians, Iraqis, Lebanese and Egyptians make up a huge percentage of the population, and bring with them their ways of life.

Recent Iraqi refugees have helped to culture Jordan in two ways, explains Fady Ghazal. The millionaire Iraqis often support and donate to the arts, while the poorer ones are often rich in artistic ability. Iraqi people have enriched Jordan with arts and craft, paintings, sculptures and musicians.

Syria too has played its part, to a certain extent. Ghazal says the border with Syria is quite open so Jordan is able to bring in Syrian musicians and dancers. Massive Palestinian influences exist because of the population and there is always a lot of acceptance for any Palestinian musician in Jordan, says Fady Ghazal from OrangeRed.

In that, Jordan has a rich, intercultural nature, even though that richness is not purely Jordanian. Immigrants have brought in valued culture but they have also quenched a thirst for native artists to hone their skills.

But this cultural aspect of life is not seen to be a priority for Jordanians. It is usually the case that the majority care little for the organised cultural events. Sleeping for many crops up as a more important way to spend time, than appreciating the cultural aspect of life.

What people also care about is coffee and talking. This is an oral culture, says Rana Sweis, a young journalist in the city. Talking and word of mouth is the number one form of communication. 21-year-old Donya Akl is the perfect example of this. See says meeting friends over coffee is one of the first things that comes to mind in her spare time. Over a coffee, or three, they spend hours and hours talking and talking.

Rian Evers, an artist from Holland who recently arrived in Amman for a five-month internship, says discussions over coffee here tend to be exceptionally intense, in comparison to what she is used to. Conversations cover political and religious affairs, and so far she has not experienced one 'superficial' chat. The girl from Holland has also developed a fondness for Shisha in her short time here. 'It's better than your average cigarette', she says. Shisha, the Turkish pipe smoking, is seen as the perfect complimentary fix to the coffee-talking priority list.

Shisha used to be a past-time for the elderly, but in recent years the younger people have taken a real liking to it. Its availability is one major factor in making people lean more and more towards the big smoke.

A HIDDEN ABUNDANCE

People also love to dance and drink. First impressions show little evidence of Amman being an alcohol city. But, new Jordan is seeing a rise in pub culture. Locals constantly reassure you that pubs are in abundance, but they are hidden, and for a reason. Ghazal says a lot of people wouldn't go drinking if they felt exposed, because of the religious and traditional values that exist in society. He says people want privacy and for that reason pubs are often in the backstreets and underground.

He believes that now more than ever it is seen as acceptable for Muslims to drink. However, restrictions exist. Drinking amongst family members is the easiest way of getting over the traditional 'taboo' of alcohol. And while it is mostly ok for men, things are easing up for women too. Ten or fifteen years ago there would have been major issues for women drinking, Ghazal says. She would have had to be surrounded by her family so that it was known that it was acceptable for her to drink. Now, women have less of a difficulty in going into a pub. But the more closed off a pub is, the more likely people are to go.

Donya says many of her girl friends go to pubs and nightclubs; some choose to drink, some choose not to drink. She personally chooses not to go, but would not be allowed in in any event. Women who wear the headscarf, like Donya, would be forbidden from entering nightclubs and pubs, but would also not be allowed in by 'society', as she put it.

A LIFE APART - SEGREGATION

Whereas men and women may or maynot like to spend together, lesiure time is also changing in this instance. Rian was surprised to see men and women mixing in everyday life. She says students seem to take an individual approach towards the traditional 'segregation'. But apart from these casual acquaintances, 'society values' are being exercised by some venues. There is sometimes a policy to exclude males. Some venues exclude men-only groups, while others segregate the single men from the rest. Many malls forbid male-only groups on Thursday and Fridays, a policy which is enforced by front-door security men. Fady Ghazal from OrangeRed

says this is used as a way to attract families into a certain place. Families are more inclined to go to a place if they know that such a policy exists.

What young men often tend to do together is cruise in their cars. Dr Thomas Lier, Goethe Institute, Director, has noticed the drive-by leisure activity. Many men, sometimes from poor areas, hop into their cars and drive through the rich areas staring out the windows. On the other hand, there is a huge car pride among the rich. Thomas has often been surprised by the pretentious cars in Amman, particularly so by the rare Six Series BMW racing through the streets of the city.

Linked to the ostentatious cars are the prestigious nightclubs. Some of the more 'elite' clubs will refuse entry to a person who has arrived in taxi. Fady Ghazal says taxis are cheap and look bad, so if someone does travel by taxi, they would often hop out around the corner from the venue so as to save the embarrassment in this car proud city.

Jordan has often been said to be a boring place and people often complained of being bored, even to the extent that 33% of people aged 10 - 24 said they had too much leisure time in a UNICEF youth survey on Jordan in 2002. There is a general feel around the city that this opinion is now changing.

Amman is a young city, that changes when the world around it is on the move. It brings together different cultures and different people. It thrives on the coming of the new - the immergence of very old cultural ways through new immigrants. It's a marriage, a fusion, of difference. It is a symbol of everything and a symbol of nothing specific.

And with this divergence, no wonder people tend to talk and talk and talk, over a coffee and a Shisha, about the life they have lived. And as a flightcrew may or maynot have left their mark, no doubt many more people may also do the same, as more people and nationalities flow in and out of Jordan.