Aqaba Old Town: the souk, the Saraya cinema, and where to drink Bedouin coffee

Beyond the Aqaba beach hotels is a small but lived-in old town — a daily souk, the Mamluk-era fort on the corniche, and a handful of cafés where the Bedouin coffee is made the slow way.

Anas Hu · May 5, 2026

Most travellers to Aqaba come for the diving, the beach, or the border crossing — and never set foot in the old town. That's a short half-day worth giving back. The souk runs daily a few blocks inland from the corniche; the Mamluk-era fort sits on the seafront flanked by date palms; the small mosques between them are open between prayer times. And the Bedouin coffee culture that defines the town is alive in a handful of small cafés where they still make it the slow way: roast the beans, grind with cardamom, brew in a brass pot, serve in tiny cups without handles.

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1Why visit the old town

Aqaba is Jordan's only sea city, and the old town gives you what the resort beaches can't — daily life, fishermen at the harbour, the spice merchants, the men playing dominos on plastic chairs in front of cafés. It's small (a 30-minute walk end to end) and best paired with a half-day at the beach or marine park. After two days of diving, the old town is the proportion shift you didn't know you needed.

2The Mamluk fort + Aqaba flag

The fort on the corniche is properly called the **Aqaba Castle** or the **Mamluk Fort**. Built in the early 16th century by the Mamluk sultans as a way-station on the pilgrim route to Mecca, it was rebuilt by the Ottomans, captured by T.E. Lawrence's Arab Revolt forces in 1917, and now stands as a small museum + heritage building. Entry is a few JD; covered by the Jordan Pass.

Adjacent to the fort is the **Aqaba flagpole** — at 132 metres the third-tallest in Jordan, flying the flag of the Arab Revolt. Lawrence's revolt forces designed this flag in 1916; it's the same template the modern Jordanian flag is built from. The flagpole is visible from most of the town.

3The souk

The Aqaba souk runs along Al-Petra Street and a few side streets two blocks inland from the corniche. It's a working market, not a tourist replica:

- **Spice merchants.** Cardamom, sumac, za'atar, frankincense in small paper bags. Bargain.
- **The fish market.** Eastern end of the souk, mornings only. Red Sea grouper, snapper, tuna.
- **Date stalls.** Local Jordan Valley dates by the kilo.
- **Textiles.** Bedouin-pattern blankets and cushion covers. Bargain hard.

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4Where to drink Bedouin coffee

Bedouin coffee is a different drink from Turkish coffee or espresso — light-roasted beans ground with cardamom, brewed unfiltered in a brass dallah pot, served in tiny handleless cups. The pot is shaken between cups, the cardamom adds a green-floral note, and the social ritual is as important as the drink. Traditionally three cups are offered; the second is the polite acceptance, the third declines further.

Three cafés in the old town that still do it properly:

- **Café Sho-Sho on Al-Petra Street.** Family-run, serves with dates. Bedouin music in the background.
- **The Aqaba Heritage Coffee on the corniche.** Tourist-friendly but the coffee is good; rooftop view of the gulf.
- **Roastery on Al-Hammamat al-Tunisiya Street.** Roasts the beans on-site; the smell tells you you're close.

> **For solo travellers**
>
> The cafés are friendly to solo readers; bring a paperback. The dominoes-playing crowd is happy to teach you the local rules.

5Practical tips

- **Best time of day.** Late afternoon — souk vendors are still active, the fort is in golden light.
- **Friday mornings** the souk is closed for prayer. Saturdays and weekday afternoons are best.
- **Bargaining.** Expected at the souk. Start at half the asking price; settle around 70%.
- **Combine with.** Aqaba Marine Park (10 km south, half-day) or the border with Israel (5 km).
- **Photography.** Don't photograph faces without asking, especially at the fish market.

References

1. Wikipedia — Aqaba
2. Jordan Pass — official site

Verified by locals: TBD — this article will be reviewed by an Aqaba-resident editor before final publication. Drafted from Wikipedia and resident knowledge.