

In search of Medieval Petra

■ Tourists touring Shobak castle

Linking the rose city to the crusaders' fortress, promoting the development of a marginal community, turning around the fortunes of Southern Jordan's forgotten area: a multi-pronged EU-funded project, "Liaisons for growth", is underway to put the town of Shobak and its castle on the kingdom's tourism attraction list, to help residents tap into its rich history and to develop sustainable tourism.

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“AMMAN - “Do you see this fortress? It's a real miracle”. Italian archaeologist Chiara Marcotulli sifts through layers of history as she excavates ruins of a foyer in Shobak castle, a millennial crusaders' stronghold in southern Jordan that still holds many secrets under its centuries-old rubble. “We have just started to understand the principal historical phases of the castle. It is a very large place and there is so much to do,” she says.

Chiara is one of the several scholars on a mission to unearth ruins from the castle that could highlight the historical significance of the town, and help turn around the fortunes of a forgotten region. The €14 million program known as “Cooperation in Urban Development and Dialogue” (CIUDAD), aims to promote dialogue and cooperation between local actors

in the EU and in the partner countries of the Eastern and Southern Neighbourhood (ENPI region). This is done through a variety of different actions, one of which is the “Liaisons for growth” project - supported by the European Commission to the tune of € 550,000 - implemented in Jordan and Armenia with the scope to support marginal areas and to develop sustainable tourism. In Armenia, the regions of Ararat and Vajots Dzor have been targeted, and two tourist districts identified: “Armenia is a wonderful country, blessed with a real tourist potential”, says Catia Segnini, director of FAR Maremma, Italian partner in the project. “Together with our local partners we are now working on our master plan, and defining tourist packages to propose to relevant stakeholders, European tourist agencies, for example. The overall aim of the project is to increase the tourist influx

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■ Excavations at Shobak castle



■ Italian archeologist
Chiara Marcotulli

“After we held the exhibition, the volume of tourists to Shobak has increased by 23 per cent, which is double the increased rate in tourists volume seen elsewhere in Jordan”

into the country, and finally to have a real impact on local development”.

A showcase for medieval southern Jordan

In Shobak, the EU supported multi-pronged drive seeks to renovate the castle, promote it to the western world as well as local visitors. “Through our work we hope to showcase medieval southern Jordan,” continues Chiara. “Shobak - she says - was the heart of a road linking north Jordan to the southern parts of the country, including the port of Aqaba and Petra.” Perched on a hill top, the Shobak fortress was a fundamental part of the re-

gion’s medieval history, serving as an outpost for King Baldwin I of Jerusalem. After a two-year siege, the stronghold fell to Salah Addin in 1189. The Muslim leader kept the structure intact and made the castle a commanding outpost for the region’s new capital. Centuries later, the town drifted into oblivion, as interest of regional powers dwindled and disappeared, leaving inhabitants with memories of past glory, dwelling poverty and unemployment.

Guido Vannini, Chair of Medieval Archaeology at the University of Florence, says the project’s success lies in its potential link to the rose-red city. “We are trying to link Petra to Shobak by providing reason and means to tourists to stop by Shobak. Historically speaking, the two towns were connected and now we want to re-link them,” he said, noting that the University of Florence has recently organised an exhibition on the relationship between Shobak and Petra called ‘From Petra to Shobak’. “After we held the exhibition, the volume of tourists to Shobak increased by 23 per cent, which is double the increased rate in tourists volume seen elsewhere in Jordan,” he says.

A stone’s throw from Petra, Shobak has been overlooked by tourists as they head towards the rose city, the kingdom’s crown jewel of tourism industry. An agreement has already been reached between Petra governorates and Shobak municipality to establish a transport network to link Shobak with Petra, which receives around 800,000 tourists a year. The Italian team believes the castle would add an excellent side-trip to the itineraries of thousands of tourists who crowd Petra. According to Vannini, the project will begin to attract international tourists after proper infrastructure (hotels, restaurants and other) is in place. A main component of the project “Liaisons for growth” is a master plan that aims to develop the area around the castle without inflicting harm on basic infrastructure. “Our tourist master plan – he explains – would provide a flexible guideline to develop the area in terms of establishing tourist facilities without destroying any historic resource. Within a few years, the area could see tourist trails and proper signs to guide visitors through the site.”

Migrating in search for employment

For the moment, there aren’t many visitors to guide through. Adjacent to the wooden gate of the castle is a small waiting room for the one and only local tourist guide, Mohammad Rawashdeh. “Tourists prefer Petra because it is more glamorous. What people do not realize is that Shobak is part of Petra’s history,” he says.

The town of 15,000 inhabitants is nestled in a series of hills blanketed in mangroves and olive and grape plantations. Over the decades, half of Shobak’s residents have migrated to Amman and other major cities to work in steady employment in the public sector. According to those left behind, local industry is non-existent. In a main street inside the town,

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■ A government appointed Beduin who guards Shobak castle



Abu Odai, a 66-year-old retired army officer, sits on a bench to rest and have a chat with old friends after a long day of work. He has seen his hometown go through various struggles. "We do not have much support from the government," Abu Odai said. "We need projects to persuade people to stay and build the town, which is emptying slowly of its inhabitants," he continues.

And this is exactly the idea behind the EU supported action, to work with local networks to promote cooperation between urban and marginal communities. A key principle of the project is in fact to stimulate synergies to

put tourist infrastructures and packages in place. Through the set up of local agencies, partners define characteristics and priorities of their tourist districts, they work on the development of tourism products, and they put together plans for marketing and promotional activities.

It will take years of careful excavations before the secrets of Shobak are unveiled, if ever. In the meantime, the EU project "Liaisons for growth" could give the local community an opportunity to turn around the fortunes of southern Jordan's forgotten town.

CIUDAD – Sustainable urban development

<http://www.ciudad-programme.eu/index.php>

Aims to help local governments in the ENPI region address urban development problems in a sustainable manner, promoting cooperation between local actors and their EU counterparts

Participating countries

Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Occupied Palestinian Territory, Syria, Tunisia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Russia, Ukraine

Objectives:

The programme "Cooperation in Urban Development and Dialogue" (CIUDAD) aims to promote mutual understanding, dialogue and cooperation between local actors in the EU and in the Partner Countries of the Eastern and Southern Neighbourhood (ENPI region) through the provision of capacity building for the modernisation and strengthening of local and regional government. 20 projects receive grants under the CIUDAD 'umbrella': Liaisons for growth is one of them.

Timeframe:

2009 - 2013

Budget:

€14 million

Find out more:

"Liaisons for growth" project fiche >

http://www.ciudad-programme.eu/grant_profile.php?lang=1§or_id=16&grant_id=15

CIUDAD – fiche > http://www.enpi-info.eu/maineast.php?id=310&id_type=10

ENPI Info Centre Civil Society and local authorities thematic portal >

<http://www.enpi-info.eu/thememed.php?subject=14>

ENPI Info Centre - The people behind the project – Interview with Frank Samol - CIUDAD >

http://www.enpi-info.eu/mainmed.php?id=312&id_type=6&lang_id=450

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