



Market Value

Like the center of a five-pointed star, marked by a fountain and surrounded by storefronts, the Muristan Market in Jerusalem's Old City draws tourists, garment manufacturers, and serious shoppers alike

Where To?

Muristan Market
Souk in the Christian Quarter
of Jerusalem's Old City



The Muristan Market, in Jerusalem's Old City, recently marked its 123rd birthday. Yet the event passed almost unnoticed, especially since most people have never even heard of the picturesque square, its five alleyways veering off like the points of a star. Granted, in a city three thousand years old, a mere century plus is no big deal. Nevertheless, this time it's cause for celebration, if only because the Muristan is the most likely place in Jerusalem to find genuine European chic – and the conviction that even the smelly Levant has potential.

Meet Me at the Market

If you'd told the Old City's 19th-century residents that a spanking-

new market was about to rise from the dustheap in the heart of the Christian Quarter, they would have laughed in your face. The mound marked the center of an empty area as big as three soccer fields, the residue of a severe earthquake and subsequent cleanup. The place was never put to good use, inasmuch as the local council's approach to adversity was "If it's in ruins, leave it that way." Photos from the period show mounds of refuse and hovels that served as picnic grounds for the poor and latrines for wandering mules.

Then the tide turned together with the century. The Greek Orthodox Church had bought up all available real estate in the area in the 1800s. Now it



turned its gaze to the enormous, undeveloped space in the heart of the Old City's prime residential district, between Jaffa Gate and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher.

Between prayers, a monk named Euthymius with time on his hands began reviewing architectural projects and land sales in Jerusalem. He hit on the concept of acquiring the entire vacant site from the Ottoman municipality and adding a covered bazaar. In 1902, after five years of rescue excavations, dirt clearance, and mule expulsions, the city finally boasted a brand-new, European-style market with sculpted doorways and corniced walls. Though not quite avenues, broad alleyways cut through the

bazaar, meeting at its center like a Union Jack. An ornate fountain was positioned at this focal point.

Unfortunately, with typical Middle Eastern imprecision, one of the diagonals failed to materialize, leaving all the others struggling to intersect. The fountain proved unreliable as well; according to a few dubious accounts, it gushed for three minutes in the autumn of 1903, then dried up.

Nonetheless, the souk miraculously became a commercial success. To this day, it provides tourists with such classic souvenirs as leather sandals, purses and satchels, fabrics, and incense – plus fake artifacts and Dome of the Rock magnets made in China.

Modern for the Old City. The entrance to the Muristan bazaar, built in 1903

Photo: Tamar Hayardeni



The Dajani family's trinket shop is particularly popular. Overlooking the silent fountain, this establishment lures customers in with free lemonade and clean bathrooms. And do tuck in at one of the four restaurants all serving the same knafeh (spun pastry dough).

Spinning Yarns

Bilal Abu Khalaf is a Muslim with a smile as wide as Djemal Pasha's mustache and a flair for storytelling. He's getting on in years, and the hair beneath his fez is graying, but his fabric store remains the jewel in the Muristan crown. Abu Khalaf inherited the business from his father, who took it over from his grandfather, who doubtless supplied fabric to the Ottomans, if not the Crusaders and Romans as well. Here one can find standard cloth as well as outrageously priced but fabulous material from all over the world, including silks, cashmere shawls, textiles interwoven with pure gold thread (as used in the Latin patriarch's robes), and the dark Moroccan velvet traditionally purchased for the flowing garments of the *hakham bashi*, the Sephardic chief rabbi.

Abu Khalaf is also Israel's exclusive supplier of the striped satin featured in the long, zebra-patterned overcoats worn by

the extreme ultra-Orthodox Neturei Karta sect. "[These Jews] come here because they know I'll never stock *sha'atnez* (the biblically forbidden wool and linen mixture), even by mistake," says the proprietor with pride, showing off a roll of gleaming white cloth. "This is for a groom's *kittel* (white overcoat)," he adds. "Or for Yom Kippur."

Yet the most startling aspect of the store is its glass floor, revealing the ancient walls and other archaeological remains hidden in the basement. They were actually discovered by mistake, when Abu Khalaf had to take up the floor to unclog a pipe. Any other Muristan merchant would have had his plumber swiftly cover up the finds before the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) demanded a disruptive excavation. Yet Abu Khalaf wanted to know more about what



A defunct fountain stands at the junction of the five alleys. Bird's-eye view of the Muristan bazaar

Photo: Chris06

An earthquake followed by years of neglect left an area as big as three soccer fields exposed and unused



he was sitting on. So *he* called the IAA, whose inspectors promptly unearthed a magnificent segment of the 12th-century Santa Maria Maggiore Crusader Church, which had dominated Jerusalem's Knights Hospitaller Quarter.

Incidentally, had the archaeologists dug a little deeper, they would have reached the paved flagstones of the ancient Roman forum in the Byzantine city of Aelia Capitolina.

Jerusalem Hospitality

The main entrance to the Muristan bazaar, via David Street, passes beneath a vaulted tunnel that seems at first glance perfectly ordinary – until you notice the relief of an enormous German eagle above the entrance. This point was originally among the market's largest stores, until its rear wall was demolished in 1898 so Kaiser Wilhelm II and

his wife could make their way to the Church of the Redeemer. More on that historic visit later. For now, suffice it to say that the resultant space is today a shady, bench-lined area where souvenir-

A family business handed down over generations. Bilal Abu Khalaf, resplendent in fez and *jalabiya*, in his fabric store

Photo: Tamar Hayardeni

By the By

What Does “Muristan” Mean?

→ Muristan Market was originally dubbed Euthymius Souk, because the Greek Orthodox Church commendably gave credit where credit was due. Maps from the early 20th century indeed refer to this name, which also appears on local street signs to this day.

Yet most people know the bazaar as the Muristan, a corruption of the ancient Persian *Bimārestān* (hospital). This term preserves the site's Crusader character as both hostel and infirmary, belonging to the Order of the Hospitallers. The association of hospitality with medical care originates in the Latin *hospitale* (shelter), which came to encompass both lodgings and a haven for the sick (though the Old City's historic Austrian Hospice has always been solely a guesthouse). The same Latin root developed into the Aramaic *ushpiz*, guest, which in turn led to the modern Hebrew term *ishpuz*, hospitalization.



laden tourists can find refuge from the summer heat beneath the cool, stone vault.

Said shoppers generally don't realize they're actually chilling out inside a nine-century-old former hospital. The facility served the Knights of St. John (a.k.a. the Hospitallers) as a hostel where they sheltered pilgrims and tended the sick – and inadvertently gave the neighborhood its name (see “By the By,” p. 71). Leprosy and cholera were just two of the more common indispositions to strike the Crusaders, who even if they failed to recover were at least well taken care of under the arches until they drew their final breath. The superbly built masonry has stood the test of time, and over the generations the hospital gave way to a quaint row of ancient-looking stores along the street.

In 19th-century Britain, of all places, a group of dreamy-eyed Catholics embarked on their own crusade – this time a mission of mercy – and recreated the Order of St. John. They opened an eye hospital on Jerusalem's Hebron Road in 1882, in a building now known as the Mount Zion Hotel.

A similar spirit seized some Greek Orthodox around the time the Muristan bazaar was under construction, and they added a second floor above the shops to serve as a pilgrim



hostel, also named for St. John. When Jerusalem was divided between the State of Israel and the Jordanians in 1948, the hospital on Hebron Street was in Israeli territory. The modern-day Hospitallers chose to relocate to the Jordanian-ruled Old City, where they took up residence beside the original Hospitaller complex, in the Muristan bazaar. Eventually they moved their institution to Sheikh Jarrah, in east Jerusalem, where it remains. A monument at the edge of the market records that here all these good deeds began.

Old City Settlers

Most of those frequenting the Muristan are Arabs – either

Fit for royalty. The facade along Muristan Street during the bazaar's construction, 1900

Facing page: The Lutheran Church of the Redeemer was built by Wilhelm II on land gifted to his grandfather, Wilhelm I, by the Ottoman sultan thirty years before. The grandson and his retinue on Muristan Street, 1898

Courtesy of the Library of Congress Collection. Photo editing and tinting by Tamar Hayardeni



Christian or Muslim – plus the inevitable tourists. Yet Israeli flags wave from the windows of the second floor above the broken fountain. These are the only signs of a political drama that began in 1989, when the Ateret Kohanim foundation quietly purchased the entire upper floor, previously home to St. John's Hostel.

An Armenian named Matossian was paid millions for the property, but the deal scandalized the Greek Orthodox Church, which claimed he'd only leased the property from the church and therefore couldn't sell it, certainly not to Jews – and most definitely not to militant religious settlers.

After a protracted legal battle in which the court confirmed the

arrangement as a sublease, ten Jewish families moved into the building, today known as Ne'ot David. The occasion transpired peacefully under the watchful eyes of the police, despite a large Arab protest on the one hand and right-wing politicians showing their support on the other. The demonstrations continued until everyone tired of them, and the Jewish presence in Muristan became an established fact. Since 2000, the space has housed a yeshiva, which currently numbers some seventy students.

Welcome to Hollywood

The Muristan bazaar's most obvious landmark is the German Lutheran Church of the Redeemer, with its soaring bell tower. The venue was completed in time for Wilhelm II's 1898 visit to Jerusalem with his wife Augusta Victoria – a moment seized upon by Theodor Herzl, who timed his own stay to coincide with the kaiser's. Officially, Wilhelm had come to dedicate the church, whose construction was started by his grandfather, Kaiser Wilhelm I, after the site was visited by Crown Prince Friedrich Wilhelm in 1869. Apparently it hadn't occurred to Wilhelm I that his own country's meticulous adherence to building schedules didn't apply in the Middle

Abu Khalaf
unrolls a
gleaming bolt
of white cotton:
“For bride-
grooms under
the wedding
canopy, or for
Yom Kippur”



East, where “tomorrow” means anything from next week to three decades later. Hence the grandson’s excitement at finally completing the project ten years after the previous kaiser’s death.

A historic portrait of the event shows the royal procession on Muristan Street after the dedication at the Church of the Redeemer. Leading the way are Wilhelm and wife, cloaked in white and surrounded by their guards, followed by an enthusiastic crowd and a fair number of alley cats. The storefronts are visible at left, with locals peering down from their roofs. Yet the bazaar was finished only in 1902, so how could the shops already be standing?

A photo from 1900 reveals the answer. Workers were busy digging the foundation of the Muristan complex, littering the area with unsightly heaps of dirt. Possibly at the urging of Jerusalem’s Ottoman governor, the Greek Orthodox Church threw up a Hollywood-style fake wall along Muristan Street, creating the illusion of a bustling, modern city. The wall was never taken down; the actual shops were simply built into it.

The Church of the Redeemer was erected over the ruins of the Crusader Maria Latina chapel, whose entire eastern apse was incorporated into the new

structure – more proof that in Jerusalem, nothing goes to waste. A gate dating back to the Knights Hospitaller became part of the northern facade. We should all look that good at age nine hundred.

For a small fee, the more adventurous can climb up the church tower via a spiral staircase worthy of Rapunzel. The top yields an amazing view of the Muristan, the Temple Mount, and the new dome of the Tiferet Yisrael Synagogue. □

Handy Info

■ Don’t Miss

Old Yishuv Court Museum

6 Ohr Ha-hayyim Street
Entry fee, (02) 627-6319

Western Wall Tunnels

Various tours
Entry fee, *5958

Zedekiah’s Cave

Tour includes a sound
and light show
Entry fee, (02) 624-4550

The Greek Orthodox slapped together a scenic fake wall along Muristan Street, the kaiser’s route



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