

# Exploring Jordan's Umayyad Castles

> By Habeeb Salloum

“This is going to be one of the high points in my life”. Muna, my daughter, was excited as we set out from Amman, Jordan's fast expanding capital enroute to Azraq in the eastern desert to see the hunting and pleasure desert lodges of the Umayyad Caliphs (7th - 8th centuries A.D). “I'm thrilled! I've waited all my life to see these desert castles.” Muna majored in Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies at the University of Toronto.

Ahmed, our friend, with whom we were staying in Amman, had once lived in Canada and later worked for 20 years in Kuwait. He is now retired in Amman. Today, along with his son, Shehab, we were on our way to explore Jordan's desert castles. Ahmed could not fathom why my daughter was so excited. “I've travelled many times on this highway, but I've never thought of the Umayyads and their castles.” He seemed puzzled as to why one coming all the way from North America would want to see these relics from the past. Yet, he could not be blamed for the fact that Arab remains were not on his mind - he was living in the troubled Arab world of today.

Ahmed agreed to take us to explore some of the baths, caravanserais, castles, forts and fortified palaces which dot the semi-arid flat gravel terrain east of Jordan's capital - all within a day's drive from Amman. Even though they are known collectively as Umayyad desert castles, they were not all built in the Umayyad period. Some go back to Nabatean Arab, Roman and Byzantine times.

Those built by the Arabs in early Islam are said to reflect the Umayyad caliphs' nostalgic desire to escape the city life of Damascus for the carefree sands. These desert structures were, in fact, a part of extensive desert communities that engaged



Qasr Harranah

قصر الحرانة



Qasr Al-Azraq

القصر الأزرق

in agriculture and trade. Important today as classic illustrations of Islamic design, brick and stonework, carved plaster and frescos, they are said to remain, in the words of Professor Oleg Grabar of Harvard University, 'the most spectacular and original monuments of early Islamic art'.

Edging the super highway crowded with trucks and taxis travelling between Baghdad and Amman, all was not barren desert. The 21st century hand of man had been at work. We passed a large free-zone, chicken farms, stone quarries and a number of military bases. As in Umayyad times, the desert was being re-created by man's handiwork.

In about an hour and a half, we were in the oasis of Azraq, some 100 km (60 mile) east of Amman. I was shocked. Once filled with placid pools of water edged by palm trees, T.E. Lawrence in his Seven Pillars of Wisdom described it as a “luminous, silky Eden”. Artisan wells in the nearby communities had drained the water from the oasis. Today, the area is home to the 'Azraq Wetland Reserve' and the 'Shaumari Wildlife Reserve' – both trying to protect wildlife and natural vegetation.

Stopping our car by two passers-by, Shehab asked, “Can you show us the way to the Umayyad castles?” They shrugged their shoulders and moved on. Apparently, the Umayyads and their castles were of no interest to them. A man passing by, hearing our conversation, joined in, “I think you want Qasr al-Azraq. It's a few kilometres down the road.” He pointed in the direction then moved on.

In a few minutes we stopped in front of a rambling black basalt fortress, dreary in ▶

appearance built originally for its strategic location and to protect the town's main water source. An old man, the caretaker, seemingly as ancient as the fort, took us for a tour, all the time talking about Lawrence of Arabia and how he had made this fort famous. Apparently, he thought we were Lawrence of Arabia's fans who had nostalgically travelled here to walk in their hero's footsteps.

The Roman-Byzantine-Crusader castle, was rebuilt in 1237 A.D. by the Ayyubid governor in the region, 'Azz ed-Deen Aybak. Later, it served as headquarters for Prince Feisal's forces during the Arab Revolt, functioning as a base from where Feisal and Lawrence launched the final assault against Ottoman occupied Damascus.

Smiling, after I pressed a few U.S. dollars into his hand, the caretaker gave us directions on how to reach Qasr 'Amra - the pleasure and sporting lodge of the Umayyads. Driving back some 32 km (20 mile) on the southern branch of the Amman-Baghdad highway, we came to Jordan's finest Umayyad desert castle. From the roadside it appeared to be an attractive structure, very well preserved.

Built as a pleasure and sporting lodge, Qasr 'Amra, declared a World Heritage Site, was constructed either between 705-715 A.D. by the Caliph Walid I or his uncle Walid II some time between 743-744A.D. Its fame lies in its still very colourful, scarred by time, frescoes and mosaics, possibly the earliest form of Islamic pictorial art, covering almost every inch of available space on domes, niches, vaults and walls. The animated scenes vary from larger-than-life wide-eyed dancing women, some nude, to the caliph in full regalia watching a lady in her bath. Others depict hunting scenes, animals of the desert, craftsmen at work, a plot of the Zodiac constellation in one of the blue-domed rooms, and depictions of six foreign rulers – enemies of the Islamic Empire at that time.

For centuries dirt and grime covered these frescoes until, a few decades ago, Spanish restorers brought back to life this



Al-Azraq Oasis  
واحة الزرقاء



Qasr 'Amra- Castle Well  
قصر عمرة-بئر القصر

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invaluable record of the 8th century Umayyad caliphate. Martin Almagro and his Spanish colleagues who worked on the frescoes for three years called 'Amra 'a key monument to the understanding of early Arab art, which is still in a transitional state between the personality of Byzantine culture and the discovery of its own inspiration'.

After examining the 40 m (131 ft) deep perfectly preserved original well, part of a water system which made the palace's pleasurable steam baths possible, we were back on the road, travelling westward through the pleasure-land of the Umayyads.

Some 15 km (9 m) west of Qasr 'Amra, Shehab stopped by the Qasr Harrana, an imposing fortress, two stories high with four clearly delineated towers. Said to have

given rise to the misnomer 'desert castles', Harrana is in reality a desert citadel. The most impressive of the Umayyad desert castles, it served both as a defensive fort and a pleasure palace. In its courtyard, it is easy for one to imagine storytellers relating their tales and the voices and tunes of singers and musicians, while in the arcades and decorated rooms above, the caliph rested and took his pleasure.

Amid this nostalgia for the past, we ended our tour of the Umayyad palaces. Of course, if we had time, there were numerous others to explore. The once farming estate of Qasr 'Ain es-Sil, Qastal, the square-shaped Qasr Mushatta, Umayyad Caliph Yazid II's Muwaqqar, Qasr Tuba and Qasr Mushash are similar Umayyad fortress-castles which dot the Jordanian desert. ■