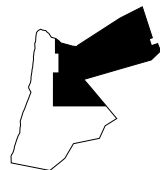


The Eastern Desert

شرقي الأردن



The deeper you go into the desert, the closer you come to God.

Arab proverb

To the east of Amman the suburbs gradually peter out, replaced by the *badia*, a stony black basalt desert that stretches to Iraq and Saudi Arabia. The desolate region has long been cut by pilgrimage and trade routes to Mecca and Baghdad; today it's the Trans-Arabia Pipeline and the increasingly strategic Hwy 10 to Iraq. If it wasn't for these, eastern Jordan would probably be left to the Bedouin and their goats. Out in the east you are quickly reminded that Jordan's lonely deserts make up 80% of the country's land, yet support only 5% of its population.

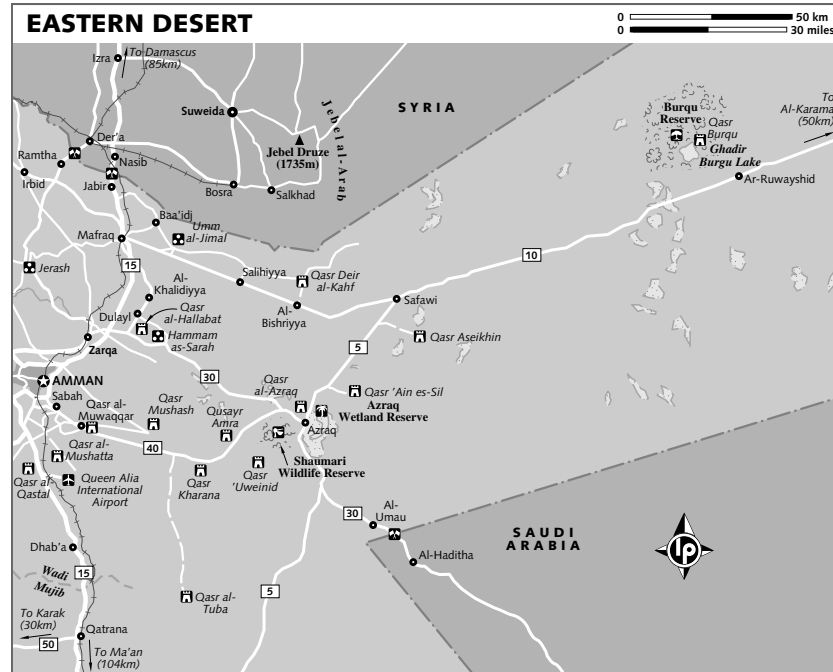
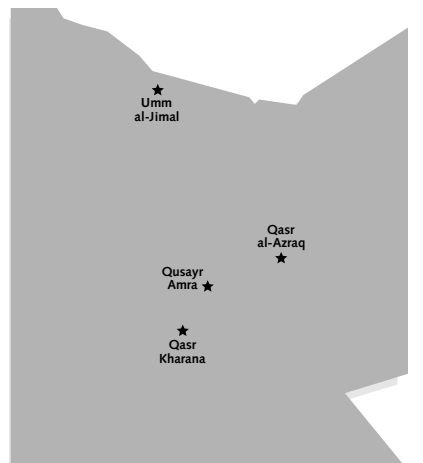
The main attractions for visitors are the hunting lodges, bathhouses, forts and pleasure palaces, collectively known as the 'desert castles', which dot the inhospitable landscape. Azraq holds the region's only real accommodation and is also the site of its greatest environmental disaster, which has seen the region's greatest oasis destroyed in the space of a generation. On a brighter note, the nearby Azraq and Shaumari wildlife reserves offer a rare chance to spot some impressive desert wildlife, including the oryx and wild ass, both reintroduced from the brink of extinction.

Public transport is limited in eastern Jordan, so travelling around in a chartered taxi, organised tour or rented car is a popular and often necessary alternative. Beyond the main highways you'll need a 4WD and preparation for a desert adventure.

THE EASTERN DESERT

HIGHLIGHTS

- Clamber through the brooding basalt ruins of **Umm al-Jimal** (p128), worth exploring for their remote setting
- Explore the desert headquarters of the enigmatic TE Lawrence at **Qasr al-Azraq** (p134), the most accessible – and one of the more interesting – of Jordan's desert castles
- Drink in the details of the wonderful and risqué frescoes of **Qusayr Amra** (p135), a Unesco World Heritage site
- Wander the maze-like corridors of the mighty caravanserai-style **Qasr Kharana** (p136), seemingly lost in the middle of the desert



Getting Around

The four desert castles that most visitors see are Qasr al-Hallabat (with nearby Hammam as-Sarah), Qasr al-Azraq, Qusayr Amra and Qasr Kharana, in this order (ie clockwise from Amman) but they can, of course, be visited in the reverse order.

With hired transport you need a full day to visit all four, with lunch in Azraq and a possible visit to Azraq Wetland and/or Shaumari Wildlife reserves. If you start really early (and pay more), it's possible to fit in Umm al-Jimal. Qasr al-Mushatta is probably best visited from the airport or from the Desert Highway.

It is feasible to visit the four main castles in a single day using a combination of minibuses and hitching, though only the castles at Hallabat and Azraq are directly accessible by public transport. You could also base yourself in Azraq town, and use public transport, hitch or charter a vehicle from there.

If you have rented a car for a few days to tour around Jordan, consider renting it for an extra day for a jaunt around the cas-

tles and reserves. If driving from Amman, head east of Raghadan bus station towards Zarqa, and follow the signs to Azraq or the individual castles.

TOURS

Jumping on an organised tour of the desert castles from Amman makes a lot of sense, and is one of the few times when an independent traveller on a tight budget will find it worthwhile to bite the bullet and pay for a tour.

Tours can be arranged at the Cliff, Farah and Palace Hotels in Amman (see p87), which charge about JD10 per person for a full-day trip. You're unlikely to get a better deal by negotiating directly with the driver of a service taxi or private taxi in Amman, and regular taxi drivers may not speak English or know the way.

ZARQA

☎ 09 / pop 700,000

The third largest city in Jordan (after Amman and Irbid), Zarqa is now virtually part of the continuous urban sprawl of northern

الزرقاء

THE EASTERN DESERT

Amman. There's not much to this gritty working-class city except a string of truck stops and refugee camps, but you may end up in Zarqa waiting for onward transport.

Zarqa is currently most (in)famous for being the home town of Jordanian terrorist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, thought to be behind many of the kidnappings and bombings in neighbouring Iraq. Zarqawi spent six years in jail in Jordan during the 1990s before being released in an amnesty.

There are two terminals for buses, minibuses and service taxis. Transport to/from both Raghadan and Abdali bus stations in Amman (200 fils, 30 minutes), and places near Amman such as Salt and Madaba, use the New (Amman) station. From the Old station in Zarqa, there is public transport to smaller villages in the region, such as Halabat (for Qasr al-Hallabat and Hammam as-Sarah), Mafraq and Azraq. Minibuses shuttle between the two terminals in Zarqa every few minutes.

MAFRAQ

☎ 04 / pop 32,000

Despite its appearance on some maps, Mafraq is much smaller than Zarqa. There is nothing to see and nowhere to stay, but travellers heading to eastern Jordan may need to go there for onward transport.

Like Zarqa, Mafraq has two terminals for buses, minibuses and service taxis. The larger Bedouin station has minibuses and service taxis to most places, including Abdali and Raghadan bus stations in Amman (250 fils, one hour), Salt, Zarqa, Madaba, Umm al-Jimal (200 fils, 30 minutes), Deir al-Kahf (for Qasr Deir al-Kahf) and Ar-Ruwayshid (for Qasr Burqu). From the Felahin station, buses, minibuses and service taxis go to places in northern Jordan, such as Jerash and Irbid, and Ramtha and Jabir on the border with Syria.

UMM AL-JIMAL

Comparatively little is known about the strange, black city of **Umm al-Jimal** (Mother of Camels; admission free; ☒ daylight hr). There are no grand temples or theatres like those in Jerash. Much of what remains at this large site (800m by 500m) is unpretentious urban architecture; over 150 simple buildings, including 128 houses and 15 churches, which provide a fascinating insight into rural life

during the Roman, Byzantine and early Islamic periods. It's great fun scrambling around the ruins.

Although mostly in ruins, many of the buildings are still discernible because, compared to others, the city was rarely looted or vandalised, and superior materials were used in its construction: Umm al-Jimal is notable for the 'corbelling' method of constructing inverted V-shaped roofs from large bricks of black basalt.

History

Umm al-Jimal was probably founded in the 1st century BC by the Nabataeans, but was quickly taken over by the Romans, who used it as part of their defensive cordon against the desert tribes. Roads led north to Bosra (in present-day Syria) and southwest to Philadelphia (modern Amman). Because it served as an important trading station for Bedouins and passing caravans, the city prospered. The city grew further during the Byzantine period; churches were constructed and Roman buildings were demilitarised.

The boom time was in the early Islamic period when this thriving agricultural city boasted about 3000 inhabitants. The key to the city's prosperity lay in its sophisticated method of storing water (you can still see many of the town's reservoirs).

However, Umm al-Jimal declined soon after the invasion by the Sassanians from Persia in the early 7th century AD; the city's death knell was sounded by an earthquake in 747. The ruins were occupied by Druze refugees fleeing persecution in Syria early in the 20th century, and used as an outpost by French soldiers during WWI.

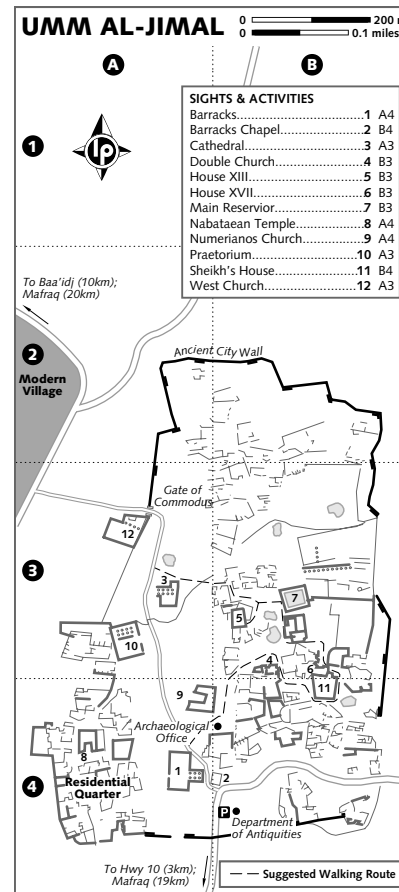
Information

It's a good idea to allow several hours to explore the ruins. Visit early in the morning, or late in the afternoon, when the light shines dramatically on the black basalt and it's not too hot (there is little shade).

For more details about the site, look for the hard-to-find booklet *Umm el-Jimal* (JD3), published by Al-Kutba and available sporadically at bookshops in Amman.

Sights

The large structure just past the southern entrance is the **barracks**, built by the Romans. The towers were added later and,



like the castle at Azraq, it has a swinging basalt door that still functions. The **barracks chapel** was added to the east of the barracks during the Byzantine period (around the 5th century). About 150m to the left (west) of the barracks is what some archaeologists believe is a **Nabataean temple**, because of the altar in the middle.

About 100m north of the barracks is the **Numerianus church**, one of several ruined Byzantine churches. Another 100m to the northeast is the **double church**, recognisable by its two semicircular naves, a wonderful structure that was renovated and extended several times over the centuries. About 80m to the right (east) is **house XVII**, whose double-door entryway, interior courtyard,

fine corbelled ceilings, decorated doorways and carved pillars point to the fact that it was built by a wealthy family. A few metres to the south is the **sheikh's house**, which is notable for its expansive courtyard, stables and stairways. Look for the gravity-defying stairs to the north and the precarious corner tower. You can just make out a double stairway to the east of the courtyard. After exiting the building you get a good view of the lovely arched window and vaulted semicircular basement in the exterior eastern wall.

About 150m north of the double church, steps lead down to the **main reservoir**, one of several around the city. Less than 100m to the left (southwest) is **house XIII**, originally a stable for domestic goats and sheep, and later renovated and used as a residence by Druze settlers.

To the west (about 100m) is the **cathedral**, built in about AD 556, but now mostly in ruins. The **praetorium** (military headquarters) is less than 100m to the southwest. Built in the late 2nd century AD by the Romans, it was extended by the Byzantines, and features a triple doorway.

About 200m to the north, through one of the old city gates, is the **west church**, easily identifiable with its four arches and ornate Byzantine crosses.

Getting There & Away

Umm al-Jimal is only 10km from the Syrian border, and about 20km east of Mafraq. With an early start, it is possible to day trip from Amman by public transport. From the Abdali or Raghadan bus stations in Amman, catch a bus or minibus to Bedouin station in Mafraq (possibly with a connection in Zarqa), and from Mafraq catch another minibus to Umm al-Jimal (200 fils, 30 minutes).

If you're driving, head east of Mafraq along Hwy 10 for 16km towards Safawi, then take the signed turn-off north for 3km to Umm al-Jimal. If you have chartered a taxi from Amman for a day trip around the desert castles, it is possible to include Umm al-Jimal on the itinerary for a little extra (maybe JD5) – but start early to fit it all in.

AZRAQ

☎ 05 / pop 6000

The oasis town of Azraq ('blue' in Arabic) lies 103km east of Amman. Once an important meeting of trade routes from Baghdad to

أم الجمال

الأزرق

المفرق

Jerusalem, and strategic stop on the pilgrim route to Mecca, it performs a similar function today, although the belching camels have been replaced by belching trucks. It forms a junction of roads heading north-east to Safawi and Iraq (230km away), and southeast to Saudi Arabia. The town itself is fairly unattractive and the roads are dominated by truck transport and diesel fumes.

Azraq was once one of the very few sources of water in the region (see opposite). It is also home to Qasr al-Azraq (p134).

Orientation

Azraq is divided in two settlements located north and south of the T-junction of Hwy 5 from Safawi and Hwy 30 from Amman.

Azraq al-Janubi (South Azraq) was founded early last century by Chechens fleeing Russian persecution and stretches for about 1km south of the junction, while Azraq ash-Shomali (North Azraq), where the castle is located, starts about 5km to the north and is home to a minority of Druze, who fled French Syria in the 1920s.

Information

South Azraq is basically a truck stop, with a strip of restaurants, cafés and mechanics. Although it is far less appealing than North Azraq, the southern end has the only budget hotel, cheap restaurants, moneychangers and private telephone agencies. The post office is located in North Azraq.

Sleeping

Zoubi Hotel (☎ 3835012; r with bathroom JD10) Apart from several insalubrious truck stops, this is the only budget accommodation in town. The rooms are comfortable, with clean bathrooms and charming old-fashioned furniture. It is located behind the Refa'i Restaurant in South Azraq, about 800m south of the T-junction.

Al-Azraq Hotel & Resthouse (☎ 3834006; fax 3835215; s/d/tr with bathroom & breakfast JD25/32/45) This semiluxurious resort is surprisingly good value, and includes both comfortable and spacious rooms, satellite TV and a pleasant swimming pool area. The turn-off is located about 2km north of the T-junction, from where it is a further 1.5km to the resthouse.

Azraq Lodge (☎ 3835017) The former British military hospital in south Azraq has re-

cently been renovated by the Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature (RSCN) as a base from which to explore the eastern desert. It's a friendly place with a nostalgic 1950s colonial feel.

Eating

A bunch of small kebab restaurants lines the 1km stretch of road south of the T-junction, rich with the aroma of grilled mutton and diesel. The best are arguably Turkey Restaurant, Cave Restaurant and Refa'i Restaurant, although you could pretty much take your pick from whatever appeals.

Azraq Palace Restaurant (☎ 079 5030356; buffet JD6; ☎ noon-4pm & 6-11pm) This is probably the best place to eat in town and is where most groups stop for lunch. For something lighter try the salad-only buffet for JD4. Evenings are à la carte. The restaurant serves alcohol, which attracts Saudis from across the border.

Getting There & Around

Minibuses (650 fils, 1½ hours) travel between the post office (north of the castle in North Azraq) and the Old Station in Zarqa, which is well connected to Amman and Irbid. Minibuses run up and down the road along northern and southern Azraq in search of passengers before hitting the highway to Zarqa. Use this minibus to travel between the two parts of Azraq.

AZRAQ WETLAND RESERVE

محمية واحة الأزرق

The Qa'al Azraq (Azraq Basin) comprises a huge area of mudflats, pools and marshlands. Before some of this was declared an 'internationally important wetland' in 1977, the wetlands suffered appalling ecological damage (see opposite).

The RSCN has now taken control of the wetlands and established a small (12 sq km) **reserve** (☎ 3835017; admission JD2, combination ticket with Shaumari Wildlife Reserve JD3; ☎ 9am-sunset). Until more water is pumped into the wetlands to attract the birds, there's not that much to see, but it is easy to reach, just 500m east of town, and can be combined with a trip to the desert castles and Shaumari Wildlife Reserve.

Information

A new **visitor centre** (☎ 3835017), run by the RSCN, marks the entrance to the reserve.

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE WETLANDS?

The Azraq Basin originally fanned out over 12,710 sq km (an area larger than Lebanon). Excavations clearly indicate that it was home to early communities thousands of years ago and once supported roaming herds of animals, including elephants, cheetahs, lions and hippos.

But the wetlands have become an ecological disaster. Extraction of the water from the wetlands to the developing cities of Amman and Irbid started in the late 1960s. Some of the water was 'fossil water' – around 10,000 years old – and was being replaced less than half as quickly as it was being pumped out. Experts believe that 3000 cu metres of water filled the wetlands every year about 40 years ago. The figure plummeted to a catastrophic 10 cu metres per year in 1980, and by 1991 the wetlands had dried up completely. A generation ago there was surface water, but in the 1990s the water level dropped to over 10m below the ground. At this time, salt water seeped into the wetlands, making the water unpalatable for wildlife, and hopeless for drinking and irrigation.

The effect on wildlife has been devastating. The oasis was once a staging post for migratory birds en route from Europe to sub-Saharan Africa, but a simple statistic tells the tale: on 2 February 1967 there were 347,000 birds present in the wetlands; on 2 February 2000, there were just 1200 birds. The wetlands were also home to a species of killifish (*Aphanius sirhani*), a small fish of only 4cm to 5cm in length and found nowhere in the world outside Azraq. Believed extinct in the late 1990s, a few somehow survived and the RSCN is trying to ensure the killifish population is again able to grow.

Despite efforts in the 1960s to declare the Azraq wetlands a protected national reserve, it was not until 1977 that the RSCN finally established the Azraq Wetland Reserve.

Since 1994, serious funding and commitment from the UN Development Program (UNDP), Jordanian government and RSCN has successfully halted the pumping of water from the wetlands to urban centres. Around 1.5 million cu metres of fresh water is now being pumped back into the wetlands every year by the Jordanian Ministry of Water, an ongoing process which, it is hoped, will enable 10% of the wetlands to be restored, thereby decreasing salinity and attracting wildlife again to the region. It is estimated, however, that more than 500 illegal wells still exist in the area.

It contains an informative interpretation room, an education room (to raise awareness of the wetlands plight and for the training of guides) and an RSCN Nature Shop.

Products from the nature shop are made in the **handicrafts centre** (☎ 9am-4pm Sun-Thu), 800m from the visitors centre, where you can see the painting of ostrich eggs, silk screening and embroidery.

Wildlife

The RSCN estimates that about 300 species of resident and migratory birds still use the wetlands during their winter migration from Europe to Africa. They include raptor, several species of lark, desert wheatear, trumpeter finch, eagle, plover and duck. A few buffaloes wallow in the marshy environs, and there are jackals and jerbils at night. The best time to see birdlife is winter (December to February) and early spring (March and April), although the raptors arrive in May. How many birds you actually

get to see depends largely on water levels in the reserve.

A 1.5km pathway through the reserve known as the **Marsh Trail** takes 30 minutes to walk, and is ideal for **bird-watching**, although serious birding enthusiasts could take much longer, stopping at the bird hide en route. A viewing platform overlooks the Shishan springs, which once watered the entire marshlands. The path then continues along an ancient Roman or Umayyad water control wall.

SHAUMARI WILDLIFE RESERVE

محمية الشومري

The **Shaumari Wildlife Reserve** (Mahmiyyat ash-Shaumari; www.rscn.org.jo; admission JD2, combination ticket with Azraq Wetland Reserve JD3; ☎ 8am-4pm) was established in 1975 and was the first of its kind in Jordan. Its aim was to reintroduce wildlife that had disappeared from the region, most notably the Arabian oryx (see p132) but also Persian onagers (wild

SAVING THE ARABIAN ORYX

The last time the Arabian oryx was seen in Jordan was in 1920 when hunting drove the animal to local extinction. In 1972 the last wild Arabian oryx was killed by hunters in Oman and the oryx was declared extinct in the wild. The nine lonely oryxes left in captivity were pooled and taken to the Arizona Zoo for a breeding programme. They became known as the 'World Oryx Herd'.

In 1978 four male and four female oryxes were transported to Jordan and three more were sent from Qatar the following year. In 1979 the first calf, Dusha, was born and Jordan's oryx began the precarious road to recovery. By 1983 there were 31 oryxes in Shaumari and they were released into the large enclosures. Since that time, they have been treated as wild animals to facilitate their eventual release into the wild.

The Arabian oryx is a herbivore, and, although its white coat had traditionally offered camouflage in the searing heat of the desert, it was also highly prized by hunters, as were its long curved horns, thereby precipitating its near extinction. Oryxes live in herds – even in the enclosures of Shaumari the animals have divided into two or three small herds. Every two to three years, younger males challenge the leader of the herd for dominance, locking horns in a battle in which the loser often dies.

Well adapted to their desert environment, oryxes once had an uncanny ability to sense rain on the wind. One herd is recorded as having travelled up to 155km, led by a dominant female, to rain. In times of drought, oryxes have been known to survive 22 months without water, obtaining moisture from plants and leaves. In Shaumari, according to the RSCN, a whole year's rainfall is only just enough to get your feet wet so the oryxes here are provided with water.

Most oryx calves are born in winter with an 8½-month gestation period. Mothers leave the herd just prior to birth to make a small nest, returning to the herd two or three months after the birth of the calf (which can be up to 5kg in weight). Oryxes have a life span of about 20 years.

In a significant landmark for environmentalists the world over, a small group of oryxes was reintroduced into the wild in the Wadi Rum Protected Area in 2002 – a small, tentative step in what is hoped will be the recovery of the wild oryx in Jordan. The next step is to introduce oryx to the Burqu area in the far northeast.

ass), goitered gazelle and ostrich. Despite poaching and natural predators, four species of wildlife have flourished, a testament to RSCN efforts.

The small (22 sq km) Shaumari Wildlife Reserve is not the place to go to see wildlife roaming the plains unhindered – the animals you'll see are kept in large enclosures – but it is worth a quick visit to see some of the region's most endangered wildlife and the environmentally significant work being done by the RSCN, and it's generally a hit with children.

Orientation & Information

At the entrance to the reserve is a shop selling RSCN products. To the right as you pass through the gate is the nature centre, detailing the fight to save the oryx. Further in is a small picnic area and children's playground, which leads to the **observation tower** and telescope, from where most of the animal species can be seen, including the ornery ostriches.

If you want to get closer, take the **Oryx Safari** (JD10 for up to 10 people, one hour) that drives through the desert to spot oryx. Night safaris are also possible.

Wildlife

Shaumari is home to four main types of wildlife: the Arabian oryx (87 now in the reserve); the blue-necked and red-necked ostrich (40), which was long ago hunted to extinction in the wild in Jordan; the Sabutu Rosa and Dorcas gazelles (six); and the Persian onager or wild ass (eight).

Nearly 250 species of bird have been identified, including raptor, golden eagle and Egyptian vulture. The best time of year to see birds and wildlife is spring (March to May) and early winter (December).

Sleeping & Eating

You can sleep in the 11 tents of the reserve **campground** (s/d/tr/q per person incl admission fee JD13/11/10/9). With permission from RSCN staff, you can also pitch your tent and use

the toilets and cold showers for free. You'd need to be self-sufficient with food, though you can use the kitchen.

Getting There & Away

Shaumari is well signposted on the road from Azraq south to the Saudi border. From the T-junction in Azraq, the turn-off is 7km to the south, while the small road to the reserve runs for a further 6km. The last kilometre is gravel. It is relatively easy to charter a minivan to the reserve from Azraq (JD5), but make sure you arrange for the driver to wait, unless you want to hike 5km back to the main road.

DESERT CASTLES

القصور الصحراوية

A string of buildings (pavilions, caravan-serais, hunting lodges, forts) and ruins – known collectively (if a little erroneously) as the desert castles – pepper the deserts of eastern Jordan. Most were built, or taken over and adapted, by the Damascus-based Umayyads (AD 661–750) in the earliest years of Islam, though the foundations of two castles, Al-Azraq and Al-Hallabat, date from Roman times. The interiors were richly decorated with mosaics, frescoes, marble, plaster and painted stucco, providing oases of pleasure in the harsh desert.

There are various theories about their use. The early Arab rulers were still Bedouin at heart and their love of the desert probably led them to build (or remodel) these pleasure palaces, which once teemed with orchards and wild game. They pursued their pastimes of hawking, hunting and horse-racing for a few weeks each year. The evenings were apparently spent in wild festivities with plenty of wine, women, poetry and song. They also served as popular staging posts for pilgrims travelling to Mecca and along trade routes to Syria, Arabia and Iraq (never underestimate the luxury of a hot bath in the desert!).

Some historians say that only here did the caliphs (Islamic rulers) feel comfortable about flouting Islam's edicts against the representation of living beings and the drinking of wine. Others have suggested that they came to avoid epidemics in the

big cities or even to maintain links with, and power over, the Bedouin, the bedrock of their support in the conquered lands.

Information

Some of the more remote castles are locked, so you may have to find the caretaker. If he opens any door especially for you (or provides a commentary), a tip (about 500 fils) is obligatory. The five main castles listed following (except Qasr al-Mushatta) have useful explanations inside their entrances. All are building visitor centres and an entry fee of around JD2 may soon follow.

Before setting off, make sure you pick up a free copy of the excellent *Desert Castles* brochure, published by the Jordan Tourism Board (JTB) and available at the JTB office in Amman (see p70). If you want more information about the castles, pick up the small *The Desert Castles*, published by Al-Kutba (JD3) and available from the larger bookshops around Jordan.

See p127 for information on tours and transport to the castles.

QASR AL-HALLABAT قصر الحلابات

This first stop for many visitors on a day trip from Amman is not necessarily the most interesting, so this could be missed if you're pushed for time.

A new visitor centre has been built at the entrance to the site and an entry fee may soon follow. Restoration is continuing under Spanish direction.

Hallabat is a good place to watch the sunset, so if you have your own transport, and don't mind driving back to Amman in the dark, try to finish at Qasr al-Hallabat late in the afternoon.

History

The *qasr* was originally a Roman fort during the reign of Caracalla (AD 198–217), a defence against raiding desert tribes, although there's evidence that Trajan before him established a post on the site of a Nabataean emplacement. In the 6th century, it was renovated and became a Byzantine monastery, but was abandoned during the Sassanian invasion from Persia in the early 7th century. About 100 years later, the Umayyads strengthened the fort, and the hedonistic caliph Walid II converted it into a pleasure palace. In its heyday it

boasted baths, with frescoes and mosaics, a mosque, several reservoirs and an entire farming community.

Sights

Today, the ruins are a jumble of crumbling walls and fallen stones, with only two buildings of much interest.

The white limestone of the square **Umayyad fort** was built on top of the existing black basalt of the earlier Byzantine palace. The fort once contained four large towers, and was three-storeys high. Look for the mosaics above the large central cistern. In the north-west corner are ruins of the smaller original **Roman fort**.

Just east of the fort is the rectangular **mosque**, built in the 8th century. Three walls are still standing, with a lovely cusped arch on the west wall, and the foundations of the original mihrab to the south.

Scattered around the fort you can spot the remains of several cisterns, a huge reservoir and a village that was home to an entire community of palace servants.

Getting There & Away

Qasr al-Hallabat is in the village of Hallabat, and is one of the few castles that can be visited by public transport. Hallabat has a few basic shops selling food and cold drinks, but has no restaurants or places to stay.

From Amman (either Abdali or Raghadan bus station), take a minibus to the New (Amman) station in Zarqa, another minibus to the Old station in Zarqa, and another to Hallabat village (250 fils, 45 minutes).

HAMMAM AS-SARAH حمام الصرح

Hammam as-Sarah (☎ daylight hr) is a hammam (bathhouse) and hunting lodge built by the Umayyads and linked to the complex at Qasr al-Hallabat. Built from limestone, the building has been well restored and you can still see the underfloor heating system and steam pipes that were used to heat the hot, cold and tepid bathing rooms. Outside the main building is a **well**, nearly 20m deep, an elevated tank and the remains of a nearby **mosque**.

The building is along the main road to Hallabat village, about 3km east of Qasr al-Hallabat and 5km from the main road. The minibus to Hallabat village drives past Hammam as-Sarah, and can drop you off (ask the driver) at the turn-off.

QASR AL-AZRAQ قصر الأزرق

Azraq fort (admission free; ☎ daylight hr) is the most accessible desert castle, and one of the more interesting. Comparatively little is known about its history and there's been relatively little excavation and renovation. For most visitors, the most compelling attraction is the historical link to TE Lawrence.

It was to be Ali's first view of Azrak, and we hurried up the stony ridge in high excitement, talking of the wars and songs and passions of the early shepherd kings, with names like music, who had loved this place; and of the Roman legionaries who languished here as garrison in yet earlier times.

TE Lawrence,

Seven Pillars of Wisdom

History

Greek and Latin inscriptions date earlier constructions on the site to around AD 300 – the reign of the Romans. The building was renovated in the Byzantine period, and the Umayyad caliph Walid II used it for hunting and as a military base. It was substantially rebuilt in 1237 by the Damascus-based Ayyubids. It was then occupied by the Ottoman Turks, who stationed a garrison here in the 16th century.

It is most famous because TE Lawrence and Sharif Hussein bin Ali based themselves here in the winter of 1917–18 during the Arab Revolt against the Turks. Lawrence set up his quarters in the room above the southern entrance, while his men used other areas of the fort and covered the gaping holes in the roof with palm branches and clay. They were holed up here for months in crowded conditions with little shelter from the intense cold. Much of the building collapsed in an earthquake in 1927.

Sights

This large building was constructed out of black basalt stone, and was originally three storeys high. Some **paving stones** in the main entrance have small indentations, carved by former gatekeepers who played an old board game using pebbles to pass the time. By the courtyard entrance look for the carvings of animals and various inscriptions.

Above the entrance is **Lawrence's Room**, strategically overlooking the entry and off-

set with arrow slits for defence. Opposite the entrance, and just to the left, are the remains of a small **altar**, built in the 3rd century AD by the Romans. In the middle of the expansive **courtyard** is a small **mosque**, angled to face Mecca. It dates to the Ayyubid period (early 13th century), but was built on the ruins of a Byzantine church. In the northeast corner of the courtyard, a hole with stairs leads down to a **well**, full of water until about 20 years ago. In the north-west corner are the ruins of the **prison**.

The northern sections are residential areas with barely discernible ruins of a **kitchen** and **dining room**, and nearby **store-rooms** and **stables**. The **tower** in the western wall is the most spectacular, and features a huge **door** made of a single massive slab of basalt. Lawrence describes in his book *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* how it 'went shut with a clang and crash that made tremble the west wall of the castle'.

Getting There & Away

Qasr al-Azraq is easy to reach from Amman by public transport. The castle is situated in Azraq ash-Shomali (North Azraq), about 5km north of the T-junction at the end of the highway from Amman. See p130 for details about travelling to and around Azraq, and p130 for information about places to stay and eat.

QUSAYR AMRA قصر عمرا

Heading back towards Amman along Hwy 30, a turn-off south leads to Hwy 40 and **Qusayr Amra** (admission free; ☎ 8am–6pm May–Sep, 8am–4pm Oct–Apr). It's one of the best preserved desert buildings of the Umayyads, and the fascinating and still vibrant 8th-century frescoes are the highlight of a trip out to the eastern desert.

The building was part of a greater complex that served as a caravanserai, baths and hunting lodge, possibly in existence before the arrival of the Umayyads. The word *qusayr* means 'little castle'.

History

Although historians are undecided, the general consensus is that the building was constructed around AD 711 during the reign of Umayyad caliph Walid I (AD 705–15), who also built the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus. A Spanish team of archaeologists began

excavations in the mid-1970s; the frescoes have been restored with the assistance of governments and private institutions from Austria, France and Spain. The building is a Unesco World Heritage site.

Information

Entrance to the complex is through the excellent **visitor centre**, which has a relief map of the site, and some detailed descriptions of the site's history and the frescoes, plus some public toilets.

Photography of the interior doesn't seem to be regulated but bear in mind that flash photography will harm the frescoes.

Sights

The entrance of the main building opens immediately to the frescoed **audience hall**, where meetings, parties, exhibitions and meals were held.

As your eyes grow accustomed to the light you are greeted by two topless women that are painted on the arches, holding bowls of food (or money) against a blue background; look for the rich details in the cloth.

On the right side of the right wall is a scene of wrestlers warming up. To the left is the image of a woman who is bathing in what looks like an 8th-century thong. To the left of this painting are the defaced images of the Umayyad caliph surrounded by **six great rulers**, four of whom have been identified – Caesar, a Byzantine emperor; the Visigoth king, Roderick; the Persian emperor, Chosroes; and the Negus of Abyssinia. The fresco either implies that the Umayyad ruler was their equal or better, or it is simply a pictorial list of Islam's enemies. Above is a hunting scene. The left corner depicts a reclining woman with two attendants holding fans. Above her are twin peacocks and the Greek word for victory.

The main chamber alcove here features women's faces on a barrel vault topped off by a king seated on a throne surrounded by floral motifs.

The entire left wall is a huge hunting scene with dogs driving wild onagers into a trap of nets. The ceiling has a clear depiction of the construction of the baths, from the quarrying, moving the stones by camel, to carpentry and plastering of the walls.

A small doorway leads to the left through the three small rooms that made up the

THE FRESCOES OF QUSAYR AMRA

The information boards in the visitor centre at Qusayr Amra assure the visitor that: 'None of the paintings of Qusayr Amra portray scenes of unbridled loose-living or carryings-on'. Given the context of early Islam's prohibition of any illustrations of living beings, it's difficult to agree.

Just how far these boundaries were pushed is evident on the western wall of the audience hall, where there is a depiction of a nude woman bathing. Some historians speculate that she may have been modelled on the favourite concubine of the ruler of Amra. The more your eyes roam the walls, past images of musicians, naked dancers, hunters, cherubs, baskets of fruit (and even a bear playing a banjo!) the more the heresy of the frescoes becomes apparent.

And the purpose of all these paintings? Some Islamic scholars blame the Ghassanids, a pagan Arab tribe that ruled the region at the time of Rome, others mumble about rogue rulers who were not true to Islam. But most admit privately that it seems as though the rulers were simply enjoying themselves on a boys' night out, away from the confines of the court.

baths. The **apodyterium**, or changing room, has three blackened faces on the ceiling, said to depict the three stages of man's life. Local Christians believe the central figure to be a depiction of Christ. The left wall has a crazy hallucinogenic painting of an exuberant bear playing the banjo, egged on by an applauding monkey. The right wall depicts a musician and female dancer.

The **tepidarium** (where warm water was offered and warm air circulated beneath the floor) has scenes of naked women bathing a child.

The final room is the hot water **calidarium**, which is closest to the furnace outside. The highlight here is the Dome of Heaven, upon which is depicted a map of the northern hemisphere sky accompanied by the signs of the zodiac – one of the earliest known attempts to represent the universe on anything other than a flat surface. You can make out the centaur-like Sagittarius, the Great Bear and several other zodiac signs (see the map in the visitor centre for details).

Outside, a few metres north of the main building, is a partially restored 36m-deep stone **well** and a restored **saqiyyah** – a pump turned by a donkey that raised the water to a cistern that supplied water for the baths and for passing caravans.

Getting There & Away

Qusayr Amra is right on the main road and hard to miss, but there are no buses so you'll have to hitch along Hwy 40. It's on the north side of the road, 26km from Azraq, southwest of the junctions of Hwys 30 and 40. From Azraq, take a minibus towards Zarqa as far as the junction, then hitch. You could

charter a taxi from Azraq and combine it with a visit to Qasr Kharana.

QASR KHARANA قصر خارنة

Located in the middle of a treeless plain, this mighty two-storey **building** (admission free; ☞ daylight hr) clearly looks like a fortress, but historians are divided; the narrow windows were probably for air and light rather than for shooting arrows, and though it looks like a *khan* (caravanserai), it wasn't located on any major trade route. The most recent supposition is that it was a meeting room for Umayyad rulers and local Bedouin.

Although small (35 sq metre), the castle has been nicely restored and is worth visiting.

History

A painted inscription above one of the doors on the upper floor mentions the date AD 710, making it one of the earliest forts of the Islamic era. The presence of stones with Greek inscriptions in the main entrance suggests it was built on the site of a Roman or Byzantine building, possibly as a private residence.

Information

A new **visitor centre** has been built at the site, with some displays on local history.

Sights

About 60 rooms (known as *beit*) surround the **courtyard** inside the castle. The long rooms either side of the arched **entrance** were used as **stables**, and in the centre of the courtyard was a **basin** for collecting rainwater.

Make sure you climb to the top levels along one of the elegant **stairways**, passing en route

some rooms with vaulted ceilings. Most of the rooms in the upper levels are decorated with well-restored **carved plaster medallions**, set around the top of the walls, which are said to indicate Mesopotamian influence. Stairs in the southeast and southwest corners lead to the 2nd floor and the roof, from which there are great **views** of the surrounding *badia* – although the nearby highway and power station spoil the ambience somewhat.

Getting There & Away

This castle is 16km further west along Hwy 40 from Qusayr Amra. Like Qusayr Amra, it can't be missed from the highway, but there's no public transport along the highway. Either hitch from Azraq or Amman, or charter a vehicle from Azraq and combine it with a visit to Qusayr Amra.

QASR AL-MUSHATTA قصر المشتى

Of the five major desert castles, the 'winter palace' of the **Qasr al-Mushatta** (admission free; ☞ daylight hr) is the most difficult and time consuming to reach. For this reason it's not included on most tours.

However, the ruins are fairly extensive and fun to wander around. Many pieces have disappeared over the years, ending up in museums around the world; the elaborate carving on the façade was shipped off to Berlin (it's now in the Pergamon Museum) after the palace was 'given' to Kaiser Wilhelm in 1903 by Sultan Abd al-Hamid of Turkey.

Because the castle is located near sensitive areas – primarily the airport – make sure you have your passport ready to show the guards along the way.

History

Qasr al-Mushatta was planned as the biggest and most lavish of all the Umayyad castles, but it was never finished. It was probably started in about AD 743, under caliph Walid II (who intended to establish a city in the area). He was later assassinated by angry labourers, many of whose colleagues had died during construction due to a lack of water in the area, so building was never completed.

Sights

There isn't much to see because the castle was looted, and partially destroyed by earthquakes – with most columns and watchtowers having collapsed. However, the huge

exterior wall and carved façades still hint at the original grandeur and beauty of the site.

Right of the entrance are the ruins of a **mosque**, with its obviously rebuilt mihrab. The northern sections have the remains of a vault **audience hall** and **residences**. Segmented pillars lie scattered around like broken vertebrae. One unusual feature of the site is that the vaults were made from burnt bricks (an uncommon material in buildings of this style) rather than black basalt.

Getting There & Away

Qasr al-Mushatta is impossible to reach by public transport or hitching. Furthermore it's badly signposted, and involves going through at least two military checkpoints. If you're driving from Amman, head towards the Queen Alia International Airport, turn left off the Desert Highway to the airport, then turn right at the roundabout just past the Alia Hotel. Leave your passport at the first security check and then follow the road for 12km around the perimeter of the airport, turning right by the second and third checkpoints.

One alternative is to charter a taxi from the airport – a great idea if you have a long wait for a flight – or combine a taxi to the airport with a visit to the ruins. A visit can be made from the airport in an hour.

OTHER CASTLES

There are numerous other castles in eastern Jordan but they are mostly in ruins and of interest only to archaeologists; they're often impossible to reach by public transport and sometimes only accessible by pricey 4WD.

Qasr 'Ain es-Sil قصر عين السيل

This is not really a castle or palace but a farmhouse built by the Umayyads, possibly over the fortifications of a Roman building. It is small (17 sq metres), and was built from basalt brick. There are some ruins of a **courtyard** (flanked by seven rooms), equipment for making bread and olive oil, and some **baths**.

It is located just off the main road through Azraq ash-Shomali (North Azraq), and only about 2km from Qasr al-Azraq.

Qasr Aseikhin قصر الشيخين

This small Roman fort, built from basalt in the 3rd century over the ruins of a 1st-century Nabataean building, has great views from the hilltop, but nothing else to justify a

detour. It's about 22km northeast of North Azraq, and only accessible by 4WD. Go along the road north of Qasr al-Azraq for about 15km, and follow the signs to the fort.

Qasr Deir al-Kahf قصر دير الكهف

Deir al-Kahf (Monastery of Caves) is another Roman fort, built in the 4th century, also from black basalt. The ruins are more extensive than some others but it is still very difficult to reach. There is an access road north of Hwy 10, or look for the signs along the back roads east of Umm al-Jimal.

Qasr Mushash قصر موشاش

This large (2 sq km) Umayyad settlement is mostly in ruins. The highlights are the remains of the **palace**, a large **courtyard** surrounded by a dozen rooms, the **baths** and **cisterns**, and **walls** built to protect against possible flooding. It's only accessible by 4WD. Look for the sign along Hwy 40.

Qasr al-Muwaqqar قصر الموقر

This former caravanserai was built in the Umayyad period, but the ruins are so decrepit that it's not worth bothering to find. There are some remains of **reservoirs**, **Kufic inscriptions** and **columns**, but little else to see; the most interesting item, a 10m stone tower with Kufic inscriptions, is now in the National Archaeological Museum in Amman. The views are wonderful, however.

The ruins are located about 2km north of Hwy 40.

Qasr al-Qastal قصر القسطل

This ruined Umayyad settlement was ornately renovated by the Mamluks in the 13th century AD, but very little remains. The main building still standing is the 68-sq-metre **palace**, but there are ruins of an **Islamic cemetery** and **baths** nearby. It is located just to the west of the Desert Highway, before the turn-off to the airport, but is poorly signposted.

Qasr al-Tuba قصر التوبة

This is one of the most impressive of the lesser-known castles, but is also the most difficult to reach. It was erected by the Umayyad caliph Walid II in about AD 743, but (like Qasr al-Mushatta) it was never finished after he was assassinated. The castle was probably going to be a caravanserai, and is unusual because it's made out of bricks. You can see

an impressive doorway from the site at Amman's National Archaeological Museum.

The castle is only accessible by 4WD along a poorly signed dirt track (35km) west of the Desert Highway, or an unsigned dirt track south (50km) of Hwy 40. Because the roads are so difficult to find and follow, a knowledgeable guide is recommended.

Qasr 'Uweinid قصر عويند

This Roman military fort was built in the 3rd century AD to protect the source of Wadi as-Sirhan (now in Saudi Arabia), but was abandoned less than 100 years later. It is only accessible by 4WD, and is about 15km southwest of Azraq al-Janubi (South Azraq); look for the turn-off along the road towards Shaumari Wildlife Reserve.

Qasr Burqu قصر بورقو

You'd have to be pretty dedicated to visit this brooding black basalt fort and it's certainly too difficult to reach to be a part of a day trip around the desert castles. The fort was originally built in the 3rd century AD by the Romans, became a monastery during the Byzantine period and was restored by the Umayyads in about AD 700.

It's the remote location of the castle on the edge of the **Ghadir Burqu** lake, and the apparent incongruity of the lake in the harsh desert, which makes this place so special. With a tent and a 4WD you could have an adventurous desert trip out here.

The lake is home to a number of bird species (such as finch, stork and pelican) that come to roost because the water level rarely changes, even in summer. The lake also hosts wildflowers and animals such as gazelles, foxes and hyenas.

The RSCN hopes to establish Burqu as a protected reserve and organise trips there from its base in Azraq, though this will take a few years. Contact the RSCN in Amman (see p70) before heading out here.

The good news for the flora and fauna, and the bad news for visitors, is that Burqu is only accessible by 4WD – and with a guide. The lake and castle are about 25km northwest of Ar-Ruwayshid, which is on the road from Mafraq to the Iraqi border. Although public transport is available between Mafraq and Ar-Ruwayshid, there is no chance of even hitching north of the highway to Burqu, and the access road to Burqu is very rough.

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