



Azraq & the Eastern Desert Highway

الأزرق & شرق الطريق الصحراء

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Why Go?

Imagine a space so desolate that not even a boulder or a bush troubles the 360-degree horizon. Now add a carpet of ancient black volcanic rock, unnavigable even by camels. And finally, factor in a ravaging heat so overpowering in the summer that the ground pulses before your eyes and mirages appear in the distance. Welcome to the Eastern Desert!

So why, you might well ask, would anyone bother to come here. Well the Eastern Desert may look like uncharted territory but it has been inhabited by Bedouin, crossed by caravans and visited by migrating birds since recorded history. Today you can see evidence of this traffic in a string of intriguing ruined forts, hunting lodges and caravanserais, collectively known as the 'desert castles'. At the miraculous oases of Azraq and Burqu, birds still break their journey across the otherwise featureless desert.

Best Places to Stay & Eat

- » Azraq Lodge (p232)
- » Al-Azraq Resthouse (p232)
- » Azraq Palace Restaurant (p233)

Best Castles to Visit

- » Qasr al-Azraq (p233)
- » Qusayr Amra (p236)
- » Qasr Kharana (p238)
- » Umm al-Jimal (p241)

When to Go

The best time to visit the remote plains of Eastern Jordan is early March to mid-April when temperate weather means getting stuck at a remote desert castle is merely inconvenient, not life-threatening.

With proper planning (including reliable transport, sufficient water supplies and a hat) May is another good time to visit. At this time, large numbers of raptors soar above the shimmering heat haze on their annual migration.

In winter, dust devils spiral on the plains as birds stop-over in the Azraq wetlands en route between Europe and sub-Saharan Africa.

History

A string of ruined pavilions, caravanse-rais (merchants' inns), hunting lodges and forts – known collectively (if erroneously) as the 'desert castles' – peppers the deserts of eastern Jordan, and is one of the country's

most surreal attractions. Dating back to the Umayyads (AD 661–750) in the earliest years of Islam, the desert castles were once richly decorated with mosaics, frescoes, marble, plaster and painted stucco, providing oases of pleasure in the harsh and inhospitable



Eastern Highlights

- 1 Chase the ghost of Lawrence through **Qasr al-Azraq** (p233), the former headquarters of this enigmatic British officer
- 2 Hunker down in the bird-hide at **Azraq Wetland Reserve** (p234) and watch the drama of a waterhole unfold
- 3 Meet one of Jordan's ethnic minorities, the Chechens, at **Azraq**

- Lodge (p232) and enjoy a sumptuous dinner
- 4 Admire the risqué frescoes in the bathhouse of **Qusayr Amra** (p236), a Unesco World Heritage site
- 5 Wander the maze-like corridors of **Qasr Kharana** (p243), a mighty fortress in a lonesome desert
- 6 Spot the endangered Arabian oryx on night safari

- at **Shaumari Wildlife Reserve** (p235), a vital ecotourism venture
- 7 Clamber through the brooding basalt ruins of **Umm al-Jimal** (p241), an ancient town of shimmering black stone
- 8 Use your off-road driving skills to reach **Burqu** (p243), an unlikely lake in the wilderness