Qasr Kharana: a perfectly square Umayyad caravan-meeting-house in the eastern desert

Built before November 24, 710 CE — the inscription is dated to the day. A 35-metre square fortress with 60 rooms around a central courtyard, in style equal parts Syrian, Sassanid, and Byzantine.

Anas Hu · May 5, 2026

Sixty kilometres east of Amman, on the desert highway toward Saudi Arabia, sits a perfectly square Umayyad fortress that survives almost intact. The interior inscription dates the building's completion to November 24, 710 CE.[1] Scholars argue about whether it was a caravanserai, a military post, or — the current consensus — a meeting place for local Bedouin leaders to negotiate with Umayyad emissaries. The architecture is the document. Square plan, two levels, sixty rooms, central courtyard, Syrian-Sassanid-Byzantine architectural fusion.

Most travellers see Qasr Kharana as part of a one-day Eastern Desert castles loop. It's the simplest of the bunch and gets the smallest amount of attention; it's also the only one with an inscription dating its construction to a specific day.

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1Why visit Qasr Kharana

The Eastern Desert castles — five Umayyad and proto-Umayyad fortresses, palaces, and meeting houses scattered along the modern Amman-to-Iraq route — collectively show what the desert margin of the early Caliphate looked like. Qasr Kharana is the simplest building of the group: a single fortress, no frescoes, no large-scale carved decoration, just architecture. That makes it the easiest to read.

2The square plan

The fortress is 35 metres per side, with 60 rooms on two levels arranged around a central courtyard. The exterior wall has narrow slit-windows that look like arrow loops but are too narrow to be functional defensive features — they're decorative or for ventilation.[1] Inside, characteristic Umayyad barrel vaults and transverse arches support the upper floor; the courtyard is open to the sky.

Walking it: enter the courtyard, climb the staircase to the upper level, walk the rooms. Each first-floor room is similar in size and layout — small, austere, plastered. The upper level has the inscription stone above the entrance to one of the rooms.

> A perfectly square Umayyad meeting house, finished November 24, 710 CE.

3What it was actually for

The function is genuinely debated. The arrow-slit windows are decorative; the rooms are too small for caravan storage; there's no obvious water source for long-term occupation. The current scholarly consensus is that it served as a meeting place for local Bedouin leaders, where the Umayyad caliphs would negotiate with the desert tribes whose loyalty (and supply lines) the dynasty depended on.[1] The simplicity of the architecture — no thrones, no decoration — is consistent with this. It's a building for diplomacy, not for living in.

4Getting there

Qasr Kharana is about 60 km east of Amman, on the modern eastern-desert highway.[1] Best as a stop on the Eastern Desert castles loop:

- **Self-drive.** 60 minutes from Amman. Combine with Qusayr Amra (15 km east) and Qasr Azraq (40 km northeast).
- **Day-trip with driver.** 4–6 hours of driving + 4 sites + lunch. Most Amman tour operators run the loop.

> **For solo travellers**
>
> Quiet site, easy 30-minute walk. The upper terrace has the best perspective on the courtyard.

5Practical tips

- **Tickets.** A few JD; covered by the Jordan Pass.[2]
- **Hours.** Roughly 8 am–6 pm in summer, 8 am–4 pm in winter.
- **How long.** 30–45 minutes for the fortress; 4–5 hours for the full Desert Castles loop.
- **Combine with.** Qusayr Amra + Qasr Azraq + Qasr Hallabat for a full loop day.
- **Photography.** Late afternoon for the warm side-light. Drone use requires a Department of Antiquities permit.

References

1. Wikipedia — Qasr Kharana
2. Jordan Pass — official site

Verified by locals: TBD — this article will be reviewed by a Department of Antiquities-affiliated archaeologist before final publication. Drafted from Wikipedia.