Ajloun Castle: the Ayyubid fortress Saladin built to keep the Crusaders out

Built in 1184 by a commander in Saladin's army, the castle on Mount Ajloun guarded the Damascus–Egypt road and held the line against the Latin kingdoms.

Anas Hu · May 5, 2026

Halfway up the slope of Mount Ajloun, the castle Qal'at ar-Rabad commands three wadis — Wadi Kufranjah to the south, Wadi Rajeb in the centre, Wadi al-Yabis to the north — every one of them a path the Crusaders could have used to reach Damascus from their kingdom in the west. So Saladin's commander, Izz al-Din Usama, built a fortress at the watershed in 1184. It held. The Latin kingdoms never crossed it.

Ajloun is the best-preserved Ayyubid castle in Jordan, and the cleanest view in the country of how 12th-century Islamic strategic engineering actually worked.

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1Why visit Ajloun Castle

Most Crusader-era castles in Jordan are Crusader. Ajloun is one of the few major **Ayyubid** fortresses — built by Muslim defenders against the Latin kingdoms, not the other way round. Walking it is an inversion of the usual castle-tourism narrative.

It was constructed in 1184 by Izz al-Din Usama, a military commander under Saladin, primarily to control the Damascus-Egypt trade route and to suppress

Bedouin tribes who had allied with the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem.[1] The Mamluks enlarged it with an additional southeastern tower (1214–1215 CE).

2Built in 1184: the strategic context

To understand Ajloun you have to see the wider war. By 1184, the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem held the coast from Antioch to Gaza, and the inland fortress chain — Belvoir on the Sea of Galilee, Karak in southern Jordan — was straining the Muslim trade roads to Egypt. Saladin's strategy was watershed defence: build castles on the inland ridge that would deny the Crusaders any push east. Ajloun was the northern anchor of that line.

The castle was originally surrounded by a moat averaging 16 metres wide and 12–15 metres deep — engineering on the scale that drove most besieging armies to siege rather than direct assault. Three years after Ajloun was completed, Saladin took Jerusalem itself (1187).

> Most castles in Jordan are Crusader fortresses. Ajloun is one of the few that wasn't.

3What to see inside

- **The four corner towers + curtain walls.** Connected by walls with arrow slits at standing height — the standard Ayyubid pattern.
- **The double gate.** Two right-angle turns inside the entrance to break a charge of cavalry. Stand inside the first arch and look at the murder-hole above your head.
- **The interior cisterns.** Underground chambers that fed the castle for an indefinite siege.
- **The Mamluk southeastern tower.** Slightly different stone colour from the original Ayyubid masonry — easy to spot once you know to look.
- **The site museum.** Small but thoughtful — artefacts from successive occupations, including the original Mamluk-era inscriptions on display.

4Getting there + the cable car

Ajloun town is roughly 75 km north of Amman, an easy 90-minute drive. The classic itinerary is a full-day combination with Jerash:

- **Drive yourself.** Amman → Jerash (50 km) → Ajloun (25 km further north). Half a day at each, drive home in the evening. The two are 30 minutes apart.
- **Day trip from Amman.** JETT bus to Jerash + a local taxi onward to Ajloun. Plan a long day.
- **The Ajloun Cable Car**, opened in June 2023, runs from the town up to the castle gate. Pleasant, scenic, and avoids the steep walk in summer.[1]

The Jordan Pass covers Ajloun Castle entry along with most major sites.[2]

> **For solo travellers**
>
> Take the JETT bus from Amman to Jerash, taxi onward to Ajloun, walk the castle, take the cable car down, taxi to Ajloun town for a late lunch, then bus back. A long but rewarding solo day.

5Practical tips

- **How long.** 90 minutes for the castle + museum. Add 30 minutes for the cable car each way.
- **Footwear.** Closed-toe shoes — the interior has rubble and uneven floors.
- **Light source.** Phone torch for the lower-level cisterns.
- **Combine with.** Jerash (30 minutes south) and the Ajloun Forest Reserve (15 minutes east) for a full Ajloun day.
- **Photography.** Late afternoon for the wadi views. Drone use requires a Department of Antiquities permit.

References

1. Wikipedia — Ajloun Castle
2. Jordan Pass — official site

Verified by locals: TBD — this article will be reviewed by a Department of Antiquities-affiliated guide before final publication. Drafted from Wikipedia and the Jordan Pass official site.