Qasr Azraq: the basalt fortress where T.E. Lawrence wintered in 1917

Black basalt walls, a one-tonne stone door that pivots on palm-oil hinges, and the only oasis in 12,000 km² of desert. Lawrence used it as his Arab Revolt headquarters in winter 1917.

Anas Hu · May 5, 2026

Of all the Eastern Desert castles, Qasr Azraq is the one with a story. The basalt fortress at the heart of the Azraq oasis — the only water source in a vast desert region of approximately 12,000 square kilometres — was occupied by Nabataeans, Romans, Byzantines, Umayyads, and Ayyubids before T.E. Lawrence used it as his winter headquarters during the Arab Revolt in 1917.[1] Lawrence wrote about the fortress in Seven Pillars of Wisdom, including the famous detail of the basalt pivot door.

1. Why visit Qasr Azraq
2. The Azraq oasis
3. The fortress: Roman to Ayyubid
4. Lawrence's winter
5. Getting there
6. Practical tips
7. References

1Why visit Qasr Azraq

The Azraq oasis is a pinpoint of green in a 12,000 km² desert. Every army from Roman times onward used it as a forward base, and the basalt fortress that surrounds it is the layered evidence of all those occupations. Qasr Azraq is one of the few places in Jordan where you can see Lawrence's actual desk (in the upper-floor room he used) and the basalt door he described in his book.

2The Azraq oasis

The oasis was once a year-round wetland that supported migrating waterfowl and a deep-water aquifer. Modern groundwater extraction (mostly for Amman's water supply) has dramatically reduced the wetlands; the RSCN's Azraq Wetland Reserve preserves what remains. The fortress sits next to the oasis, originally as a guarded water station on the desert routes.

3The fortress: Roman to Ayyubid

The current building took its present form following a 1237 CE renovation by Ayyubid leader 'Izz ad-Din Aybak. Earlier layers — Nabataean foundation, Roman fort (around 200 CE), Byzantine modifications, Umayyad — are visible in the lower courses. The structure features black basalt construction with 80-metre walls encircling a central courtyard.[1]

The single most-photographed feature is the **basalt pivot door** — a one-tonne dressed-stone slab that pivots on stone hinges. Push it; it moves easily, because the pivot points were lubricated for centuries with palm-tree oil.

> A one-tonne basalt door that swings open with one hand, lubricated with palm oil for a thousand years.

4Lawrence's winter

In winter 1917–18, T.E. Lawrence and Sherif Ali ibn al-Hussein used Qasr Azraq as a forward operating base for the northern Arab Revolt campaigns. Lawrence's room is on the upper level — small, plastered, with a single window. He wrote about the fortress in Seven Pillars of Wisdom, including the famous description of the basalt door: "The door was a poised slab of dressed basalt, a foot thick, turning on pivots of itself."

Standing in his room is one of the few places in Jordan where you can be in a specific room from a specific moment in Seven Pillars of Wisdom.

5Getting there

Qasr Azraq is roughly 100 km east of Amman in the Azraq oasis. From elsewhere:

- **Self-drive.** 90 minutes from Amman. Combine with Qusayr Amra (40 km southwest) and Qasr Kharana (50 km southwest) for the standard 3-castle loop.
- **From the Azraq Wetland Reserve.** 5 minutes — combine with the wetland visit.
- **From Shaumari Wildlife Reserve.** 15 minutes — combine for an Azraq-area half-day.

> **For solo travellers**
>
> Lawrence-readers should set aside a quiet 90 minutes here. Bring an excerpt of Seven Pillars chapters covering Azraq.

6Practical tips

- **Tickets.** A few JD; covered by the Jordan Pass.[2]
- **How long.** 60–90 minutes here; pair with the wetland reserve and Shaumari for a half-day Azraq loop.
- **Best time of day.** Late afternoon — the black basalt against orange-pink sunset light.
- **Combine with.** Qusayr Amra (40 km southwest), Azraq Wetland Reserve (5 min), Shaumari (15 min).
- **Bring water.** Even at the oasis, the desert sun is intense.

References

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

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