Karak vs Shobak: comparing the two big Crusader castles on the King Highway

Both built in the 12th century, both held against Saladin until 1188-1189, both sit on the King Highway. Practical comparison of which to visit if you only have time for one.

Anas Hu · May 5, 2026

If you drive the King Highway from Amman to Petra, you pass two of the most important Crusader castles in the Levant: Karak (130 km south of Amman) and Shobak (210 km south, 25 km north of Petra). Both were built in the 12th century, both anchored the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem's lordship of Oultrejordain, and both held out against Saladin until the late 1180s. The two castles are similar in spirit but very different in setting: Karak is a long ridge fortress in the centre of a modern town, while Shobak (also called Montreal) sits alone on a small hilltop in the desert. If you only have time for one, here's how to choose.

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1Why both castles matter

The Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem held the inland fortress chain in southern Jordan for the better part of a century — from the 1110s until Saladin's campaign of 1188–1189. The chain controlled the King Highway (the inland route between Damascus and the Hijaz) and intercepted caravans bound for Mecca. Karak and Shobak were the two largest castles in the chain, built deliberately within signal-fire distance of each other to coordinate defence.

2The dates side-by-side

Shobak (Montreal). Built 1115 by Baldwin I of Jerusalem. Crusader-era stronghold of the Lordship of Oultrejordain. Saladin captured it after a long siege in 1189 (one year after Karak). Fell after Reynald of Châtillon's death (Battle of Hattin, 1187). **Karak.** Built 1140s by Pagan the Butler under Fulk of Jerusalem. Reynald of Châtillon's notorious raiding base from 1176. Saladin's two sieges (1183, 1184); fell to his nephew Sa'd al-Din in 1188.

Both castles passed through Ayyubid and Mamluk control and were modified accordingly. The visible architecture today is layered.

> Two castles, one chain. Both held against Saladin. Both fell within a year of Hattin.

3What to see at each

Karak (130 km south of Amman). Massive — a ridge fortress 220 m long. Vaulted galleries on multiple levels, the Crusader chapel, the Mamluk additions. Underground passages and a documented dungeon. Town centre is built around it; rooftop restaurants in Karak town offer the best photographs. See the dedicated Karak Castle post. **Shobak (210 km south of Amman, 25 km north of Petra).** Smaller and more isolated. Sits on its own hilltop with a 360° desert view. The Crusader chapel survives in good condition, the central courtyard has a vaulted hall, and a network of underground passages descend from the keep. The setting (alone on a hilltop, no modern town surrounding) makes it more atmospheric than Karak.

4Which one to visit

If your only Jordan day is heading to Petra. Shobak. It's only 25 km from Petra and an hour-stop fits easily into a Petra-bound day. **If you have a half-day from the Dead Sea or Amman.** Karak. It's the stronger half-day from the north — bigger, more documented, with the rooftop-restaurant lunch option. **If you want the more atmospheric photograph.** Shobak. The isolated hilltop setting reads better in landscape photographs than Karak's urban context. **If you want the best vaulted-galleries experience.** Karak. Multiple levels of intact vaulted halls; the underground passages are extensive. **If you have time for both.** Karak as a half-day from the north (Amman/Dead

Sea), Shobak as a stop on the Karak-Petra leg of the road trip. Karak in the morning, drive south, Shobak in the late afternoon, sleep in Wadi Musa or Dana.

> **For solo travellers**
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> Karak — bigger, more to see, town has cafés for solo lunch. Shobak as a 45-minute pit-stop on the Petra drive.

5Practical tips

- **Tickets.** Each castle: a few JD; both covered by the Jordan Pass.
- **How long.** Karak 90 minutes; Shobak 60 minutes.
- **Footwear.** Closed-toe shoes for both; the underground passages have rubble.
- **Light source.** Phone torch for both for the lower passages.
- **Combine with.** Wadi Mujib (60 km north of Karak), Dana Biosphere (75 km south of Karak, 50 km north of Shobak), Petra (25 km south of Shobak).

References

1. Wikipedia — Kerak 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 (Kerak Castle) and historical knowledge.