

# Winter Palace

By Ammar Khammash, The Jordan Times Weekender - January 2003

For those arriving in Jordan, Qasr Mushatta can be the first archeological monument to see, even before their feet touch the Jordanian ground. The Qasr is beautifully visible from the windows of airplanes landing on the northern runway; it is just outside the airport fence.

image not found

[https://www.khammash.com/sites/default/files/images/research/mushatta\\_01\\_0.jpg](https://www.khammash.com/sites/default/files/images/research/mushatta_01_0.jpg)



Driving closer, you would first spot parts of the western elevations. Then the road brings you nicely to the middle of the southern side, at the main entrance of the palace. At this point there is a feeling of greatness, of beauty centered around symmetry and strict spatial order; a bit like Taj Mahal or some other Islamic monument planned in this grand axial style.

Before entering the middle of the central building, it is worthwhile to inspect the boundary wall with its intricate carvings just at the right of the main entrance. This wall is a monument by itself. Not only did it protect the main building from the vast desert landscape, it also created a beautiful space within, a space that is sculpted by this outer wall and the elevations of the palace in the middle. It is important to picture some of the trendy hobbies of Muslim caliphs in those days, during the golden age of the 8th century AD. Some

scholars argue that these desert castle or palaces were constructed as private hunting destinations, with private walled-in miniature 'nature reserve'. The big space between the outer wall and the palace would then be better imagined as a garden, a place of paradise, with all sorts of animals surrounding the central palace. There might have been gazelles, ibex, oryx, and ostriches running around in this space 'besides the usual domestic animals kept for transportation or meat. But there might have been no animals at all, except for the occasional hungry hyena hiding in this ruin in a cold desert storm; this palace was never finished and thus was never properly used.

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[https://www.khammash.com/sites/default/files/images/research/mushatta\\_02.jpg](https://www.khammash.com/sites/default/files/images/research/mushatta_02.jpg)



The fact that both Qasr Mushatta and Qasr Tuba were constructed is something to contemplate. These palaces might have been built to realize a fantasy that, later on, after the structures were almost finished, proved to be not realistic or too expensive. The 'contractor' of these projects might have given up or was asked to halt construction for some reason. It is very credible that this palace had the same builder as Qasr Tuba; one building was immediately built after the other or most probably one group of workers was divided into two crews with artisans alternating between them. When looking at the fired mud bricks inside some of the rooms, take note of the pointing between the bricks. The pointing, at both Qasr Mushatta and Qasr Tuba, is applied by hand. As the walls were never finished with the usual plaster coat, the pointing was kept as the last thing the builders did. You can close your eyes and reach out for these pointing lines, your fingers will fall exactly into the vertical grooves registered in the mortar by the hand of a builder some 13 centuries ago. It might be a good idea for scientists to try to look for fingerprints in this grouting clay, and maybe, then, attempt to compare them with fingerprints from Qasr Tuba.

Jordan is blessed to have some of the world's best examples of early Islamic architecture. Such monuments are rare, representing a good case of Byzantine influences and at the same time reflecting the high

architectural language of what was then the world's leading civilization. Today, these structures still show good culture that came to us from the east, from Iraq and Iran, more than a millennia ago, as part of an axis of highly civilized human achievement.

*Qasr Mushatta in an easy destination, excellent for half a day or an early escape from office to catch sunset outdoors. Drive towards the airport, make a U-turn at the airports exit and drive back for about 2km, take the first exit to the right (eastwards). You should be driving past some factory and industrial sites. The road curves slightly to the south and gets closer to the airport's northern runway. You may, very possibly, be the only visitor, making your visit to the monument an enjoyable experience. A suitable destination for light picnic, especially in a sunny winter's day, when early grass already carpets the ground below the archeological stone. Destination is very suitable for families with children, and particularly interesting for architect friends or visitors from abroad.*

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