

Le Krak de Montreal

By Ammar Khammash, The Jordan Times Weekender - August 2002

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https://www.khammash.com/sites/default/files/images/research/shobak_castle_01.jpg



Built during the Crusader times, 887 years ago, Shobak castle is almost a natural extension of a dramatic hill. The location has provided the castle with a natural moat; a system of valleys that surround a central hill from all directions. The terrain shows unusual geologic activity, rock layers tilted from horizontal to almost vertical, sharp hillsides with rock cliffs, and rugged terrain that gains height towards the west before abruptly dropping into the distant depths of Wadi Araba. All of these geomorphologic features have provided the site of the castle with a strategic location that is, naturally, easy to defend. The shape of the landscape also helped in providing water. Springs gush from valleys facing east; which is unlike the usual trend where springs at villages in south Jordan come out of slopes facing west (Wadi Musa, Tafileh, Dana, Taybeh, and others). The way in which this castle uses its natural elegant pedestal, both for acquiring its magnificent vertical scale for defense and for benefiting from cool springwater, is part of the overall charming qualities of this monument.

While the Crusaders called it 'Le Krak de Montreal', the current name of Shobak refers to the castle as well as to its surrounding group of about 10 villages. The recent history of the castle is directly connected to these

villages. People of Shobak still remember when the castle was inhabited (till the 1950s). They would tell a story where each tower was occupied by one of the clans, and how the people were spread around the castle in villages like Al-Jayeh, Mugar?ieh, Nijil, Al Mansura, Shammakh and others.

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At the castle entrance, on the eastern elevation, is one of the towers with beautiful Arabic calligraphy, using big size letters braided in the Mamluk style and dated to the later rebuilding works of the 1290s. Walking in the ruined parts of the castle you can notice some architectural elements of European style, almost gothic, while other parts are reminiscent of architecture from Mamluk Cairo. The most interesting feature is the effects of ruined architecture playing with the views of the vast landscape around. The castle acts with its surroundings in an amusing way, windows whistling in the wind, partially collapsed openings squeezing the outside glare to draw shapes of sun on flooring stones, and rooms where the end wall has fallen in the deep valley below. The effects of time are stunning and entertaining.

In Shobak, local residents talk of passages with no ends, pitch dark and scary. From one of these passages, steps bring you down to the natural water table below the castle. This means that the steps should reach a point equal or lower than the springs at the villages surrounding the castle. References mention some 375 steps, and archaeologists have been able to make it down around 150 of those steps. Adding up the heights of all steps would yield an estimated 75 meters in vertical distance; the prospect of hitting water at these depths is very credible. The investment in digging such a staircase in layers of hard bedrock is definitely worth it, especially when knowing that in most cases, the siege of castles in such a dry region ended with surrender by the castle inhabitants because of thirst.

Shobak, the castle and its villages, remains one of the most pristine stretches of the Jordanian landscape. The

undefiled natural and cultural features are reminiscent of Jordan of the 1960s, or pictured in reports and travel accounts of more than a century ago. One also feels a peculiar purity of air, crispness of colors and some sharpness in all land features. All these qualities create a sparkling sense of focus that elevates Shobak to a location of spiritual stature.

Can best be combined with a one-day or two-day trip to Petra or Dana. To get there, it is a two and half hour drive from Amman. Due to current works on the Petra road, the best way to go would be the Hussainieh exit on the Desert Highway, drive through Qadisyeh and head south till you reach Nijil. This is also the destination for buying Jordan's tastiest summer fruits; especially apples. Protect yourself from the sun, which is particularly strong in Shobak due to clean atmosphere and elevation from sea level. Shobak destination is suitable for children, and is excellent for those who like to discover the many less known attractions within a 10km radius of the castle.

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