

Qatar Attractions

Al Jassasiya carvings. photo credit: Kirsten Amor / Flickr

Al Jassasiya

The Al Jassasiya site is one of the most mysterious and attractive sites in Qatar. Northeast of Doha, it is one of the few places where you can find petroglyphs, which are collections of rare and amazing signs carved in stone. Carvings can be found at other sites, however those found at Al Jassasiya are considered the most extraordinary in terms of both their quality and their state of preservation. An astounding 900 glyphs can be found at Al Jassasiya. Shapes vary from geometric patterns to representations of animals and boats found on two parallel "jebels," which are outcrops of fossil and sand dunes. Seventy-one daisy shaped patterns made up of nine small holes around a larger central hole also exist. The most common outlines are double rows of seven to nine shapes that look like cups (333 in total, 193 with seven cups). These cups are believed to have been used for another game called "haloosa" or "huwaila". It is known in West Africa as "mandala". Ruins of old settlements and dwellings containing local and foreign pottery dating back to the 15th century have been uncovered around the outcrops at Al Jassasiya. Yet the carvings are believed by some to be much older. Others, however, point to the softness of the rocks on the outcrops, which can be eroded quite easily, suggesting that the carvings might be more recent. Petroglyphs can also be found at Al Jassasiya, Al Wakra, Simaisma, Fuwairit, Al Ghariah, Freha, and Al Jemal.

Open: The site is always open and there is no admission fee.

Al Wsel

Human presence as far back as the Stone Age is suggested at the large archaeological site in Al Wsel. Consisting of a variety of dwellings, towers and burial sites, the ruins can be found by the sea on an outcrop 100 meters inland. Slabs extracted from sedimentary rocks and arranged into circles in the sand are the most fascinating element of this site. Current thinking suggests these configurations may have been used to mark graves. The circles are of varying sizes, perhaps indicating that larger groups used the larger stones.

In 1956, a Danish archaeological expedition discovered a number of flint stone axes, arrows and spear tips that would suggest the groups who inhabited the site enjoyed a relatively sophisticated level of development. Archaeological evidence also suggests that their economy was based on seafood, and that they may have traded with other communities along the coast.

Similar flint stone tools were uncovered along the northern and western shores of the state, demonstrating that Qatar was widely inhabited in ancient times. In 1991 and 1992, Qatari authorities collaborated with Japanese teams to carry out a K14 radiocarbon-based analysis. They determined a chronology of the site based on three phases of development. The first and oldest one is the Stone Age period (7th century BC), the second is very late 3rd century BC (2100 BC), and the third dates back to the 1st century BC.

Fishermen's Villages

Al Areesh, Al Khuwair and Al Jemal

Several settlements in the northwest of Qatar give a glimpse of how difficult life outside of the main cities was before the discovery of oil. These small villages had economies based largely on fishery, and lacked facilities or road access. Three of the sites, Al Areesh, Al Khuwair and Al Jemal, are completely abandoned today, yet still vividly tell the story of those who once called them home.

All three settlements were built at the beginning of the 19th century and their names have intriguing origins. Al Areesh comes from the Arabic "areesh," meaning shelter made by date palm fronds, while Al Kuwair comes from "kuwair," meaning small seawater canal.

These villages were first abandoned in 1937, but daily life resumed in 1945 and continued well into the 1970s when the residents once again picked up and left. Traditional Qatari mosques rest at the heart of the villages and are surrounded by a few old fishermen's houses. This layout reflects how the social structure of Qatari communities was - and still is - centered around faith and religion.

The mosques have a typical plan, fenced in by high walls and open to an internal courtyard. There is a "mothawaddah," a separate room in the courtyard for the "wudu," or ablutions. In one corner is a minaret, which is a circular shaft with a simple rounded top and a small arched door that opens to a narrow spiral

staircase. On the top of the minaret, a small room opens to the surroundings with four little windows that were used by the "muezzin" to call people to pray. The prayer area of the mosques is split into two spaces: an "iwan," or outer prayer room consisting of a portico overlooking the courtyard, and an indoor prayer area where the "mehrab" is directed towards the "Kaaba" at Mecca. Walls inside these mosques are often decorated with Quranic quotations, drawings made by fishermen and various other symbols.

The roof is made of four layers. The first consists of a series of "danchal" wood poles, often protected by bitumen. The second is a layer of "basgijl," which are woven bamboo strips. A close net of mangrove branches makes up the third layer, and the roof is then finished with a layer of compressed mud, which provided protection from the sun during the hot seasons. One of the most interesting features of this technique is the building of architraves using poles of "danchal" wood held together with a rope. This increases the adherence of the mud mortar and plaster.

Al Jemail, photo credit: Kirsten Amor / Flickr

House of Nasser Bin Abdullah Al Missned

This house in Al Khor is where Her Highness Sheikha Mozah bint Nasser Al Missned was born and raised. Her Highness is one of the most active contributors to the educational development and worldwide visibility of The State of Qatar. A high wall, embellished with Qatari-style battlements on its top, protects the house. These unique decorations evoke traditional incense burners or stylized leaves and flowers.

The house was built by her father Nasser bin Abdullah in the early second half of the 20th century. Its layout follows the traditional Qatari model for private residences. The family's domestic life took place in several pavilions built around the perimeter of a central courtyard. Each pavilion had a specific purpose, and there were separate rooms for women. The external wall and each unique pavilion provide an absorbing insight into the traditional Qatari building technique. The thick walls, which helped to isolate the heat and keep the house cool, were built by overlapping raw pieces of coral rock and limestone, joining them with mud mortar and covering them with gypsum-based plaster. The roofs of the pavilions are made up of four layers: The first is a series of "danchal" wood poles, often protected by bitumen. The second is a layer of "basgijl," which are woven bamboo strips. A close net of mangrove branches makes up the third layer, and the roof is topped with compressed mud that serves to protect the house from the sun during the hot seasons. One of the most interesting features of this technique is the building of architraves with poles of "danchal" wood held together with rope. This increases the adherence of the mud mortar and plaster.

House of Nasser Bin Abdullah Al Missned

House of Sheikh Abdullah Bin Thani Al Thani

The residence of Sheikh Abdullah bin Thani Al Thani is very peculiar because of its two "majlis" to receive guests. One of them is an external room adjoined to the house while the other is an open-air platform in the courtyard, used during the hot season.

Location and access to the "majlis" rooms were carefully thought out to balance the welcoming character of Qataris and the privacy of their family. The indoor "majlis" is located outside of the wall surrounding the house so the owner could receive guests any time without disrupting the family.

To further protect the privacy of the family, all ground floor rooms only have windows that look inward toward the courtyard, and first floor rooms have colored glass windows to prevent people from seeing inside. The house features a large courtyard in the middle with pavilions and high walls around the perimeter. This internal area served as the hub of the family's domestic life and each pavilion had a specific purpose, with separate rooms reserved for women. The pavilions of this traditional residence give its visitors an idea of the traditional Qatari building technique. The thick walls, which help isolate the heat and keep the house cool, were built by overlapping raw pieces of coral rock and limestone, joining them with mud mortar and covering them with gypsum-based plaster.

The roof is made of four layers. The first consists of a series of "danchal" wood poles, often protected by bitumen. The second layer is made up of "basgijl," which are woven bamboo strips. A close net of mangroves branches comprises the third layer and the roof is finished with a layer of compressed mud that protects the house from the sun during the hot seasons.

Another interesting feature of this technique is the use of poles of "danchal" wood held together with a rope

in the construction of architraves. This increases the adherence of the mud mortar and plaster.

House of Sheikh Ghanim Bin Abdulrahman Al Thani

Majid bin Saed Al Saed, one of the most important pearl merchants in Al Wakra, built this beautiful and unique house at the beginning of the 20th century. Used to produce “debis”, which is a traditional date-based food, and also to sell and store merchandise, the residence was purchased by Sheikh Ghamin bin Abdulrahman Al Thani in 1960. It was in the four rooms on the ground floor that the “debis” was produced. Called “madabes”, these rooms have parallel channels sunk 10-centimeters deep into the floor. These channels are linked together by a perpendicular canal near the entrance that connects to an underground pot in the corner. In the process of making the “debis”, palm fronds were laid on the channels to create a smooth, flat base. The dates were then put in sacks made of palm leaves and stacked in piles up to two meters high. The weight of the upper sacks squashed the dates in the lower sacks, and their thick juice ran into the channels where it was collected and funnelled into the underground pot. The rooms in the house that were not used to make “debis” were used to sell a diverse range of merchandise, including pearl diving equipment. The house’s water supply came from a well in the courtyard. This large space was also used to store merchandise for sale. One of the corners of the courtyard has a staircase to a wide terrace on the upper floor that features a spectacular view of the nearby seashore, where mangroves form the basis of a fascinating ecosystem.

A “majlis” that was used by the first owner to receive guests and business partners is situated on the south side of the terrace. The “majlis” rooms were carefully planned to balance the welcoming character of Qataris with the privacy of their family. For this reason, the building has a separate entrance to the “majlis” on the south side that kept visitors from walking through the ground floor and disrupting the privacy of the owner. “Badjeer,” or traditional Qatari air traps, were used to provide the house with natural air conditioning. The system was based on the construction of two parallel walls: one standing from the floor to halfway and the second hanging halfway down from the ceiling. The walls would overlap by 10 cm, with breathing room left in between. Although this method shelters the rooms from an external view, it allows wind to enter the house without dragging in any sediment. When necessary, the space between the two wall panels can be closed with a wooden shutter.

On the top of both the “majlis” and the mosque, traditional “marazims” protect the walls. These wooden channels stretch out from the roof to drain rainwater away during the desert’s rare but heavy storms. The thick walls, which help isolate heat and keep the house cool, were built by overlapping raw pieces of coral rock and limestone. The roof was finished with a layer of compressed mud, further protecting the house from the sun during the hot seasons. Qatar Tourist Attraction's Guide Map

Find attractions by location, check out all the featured qatari tourist attractions

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