BARZAN TOWERS

Description

Stretching into the Arabian sky, the Barzan towers loom above the surrounding landscape and provide the perfect place to gaze out to sea. They have been used as a platform to keep a watchful eye on pearl divers, as a look-out for approaching ships and as an observatory to scrutinise the moon's phases.

The name Barzan comes from the Arabic for "high place," quite appropriate for towers measuring 16 meters in height. Built in 1910 by Sheikh Mohammed bin Jassim Al-Thani, they are located at the southern side of the defensive system established in the late 19th/early 20th century to protect the "raudah," the valley where precious rainwater collects from adjacent higher ground. They link with two other fortified buildings towards the west and another tower towards the north.

Keeping track of the moon was essential. The "Hejry" calendar which is used in Islamic countries is based on the moon's phases, with each month starting when the crescent appears after the new moon. Ramadan is the most important of these months, marking the time when the Holy Quran was revealed to the Prophet Mohammed (Peace be upon Him). To ensure accuracy, two observers would climb to the top of the towers, viewing the new moon and agreeing when the crescent appeared.

The towers were built for strength. The walls are one meter thick at the base and further strengthened by buttresses. These were constructed as cones in one tower and as massive staircases in the other.

Besides the two Barzan towers there is a "majlis," a room to receive guests, built as an L- shaped pavilion with small windows for ventilation. Moreover, there is a mosque containing a simple prayer room which was also used as a "madrassa," a school for teaching the Holy Quran to children.

On the top of the "majlis," and the mosque, traditional "marazims" protect the walls' surfaces. These wooden channels stretch out from the roof to drain rainwater away during the desert's rare but heavy storms.

The pavilion provides an excellent example of traditional Qatari building methods and techniques. Thick walls helped to keep the buildings cool. They were constructed by first overlapping raw pieces of coral-rock with limestone and cementing the two with mud mortar. Once dry, this was subsequently covered with a gypsum-based plaster. The roof was built in four layers, starting with a series of "danchal" wood poles. These were sometimes painted with bitumen for protection. The "danchal" wood poles were then covered by a layer of "basgijl," woven bamboo strips. A closely constructed net of mangrove branches was added followed by a layer of compressed mud to protect the buildings 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 increased the adherence of the mud mortar and plaster.

It is possible to see these building techniques in greater detail either through a visit to the fishermen’s villages in the northwest or by viewing the 3D model of the Qatari mosque.

The Qatari Authorities carried out wide-ranging restoration works in 2003.

Planning a visit

Visitors can enter the building 24-hours a day. We suggest also taking time to view the additional towers found in the same area, namely the Umm Slal Mohammed fortresses. They are private property, so you cannot enter them, but their well-preserved and genuinely important historical character make them one of the most interesting and notable heritage sites in Qatar. A unique oasis full of green trees, animals and palm trees is nestled behind the towers. Refreshments and snacks are available for purchase nearby.

UTM coordinates N 25° 25' 07.66" E 51° 24' 48.05"

Directions

The Barzan and surroundings towers are in Umm Slal Mohammed, 20 km north of Doha. Take the North road and make a U-turn at the first sign to Umm Slal Mohammed. Turn right onto Umm Slal Mohammed Road and right again into Barzan Street immediately after the roundabout.