The Walls of Acre



The Walls of Acre: History, Towers, Napoleon's Siege and the Old City Today

The walls of Acre ('Akka) encircle the Old City on the northern coast of Palestine and are among the most famous historic fortifications in the world. Built by Zahir al-Umar al-Zaydani in 1750–1751 over the remains of older Crusader walls, and massively strengthened by Ahmad Pasha al-Jazzar, they turned back many invasions, most famously Napoleon Bonaparte's two-month siege in 1799. With their towers, moat and sea wall, they are part of the Old City of Acre, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. This guide covers their history, structure, the sieges they

withstood and the city they protect today.

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Quick Facts About the Walls of Acre

The walls of Acre at a glance

Arabic name	أسوار عكا
Location	Old City of Acre, northern coast of Palestine
Built	1750–1751 by Zahir al-Umar; strengthened by al-Jazzar until 1814
Length	About 2,835 m
Height	About 10–13 m (Zahir al-Umar's wall)
Shape	Irregular pentagon with towers, bastions and a moat
Main towers	Burj al-Kurayyim, Burj al-Kommandar, Burj al-Sanjaq, Burj al-Hadid, Burj al-Khazna
Gates	Land Gate (east) and Sea Gate (south)
Famous siege	Napoleon Bonaparte, March–May 1799

UNESCO	Part of the Old City of Acre, World Heritage Site since 2001

Location

The walls surround the Old City of Acre on a small peninsula at the northern end of the Bay of Haifa. The sea protects the city on the west and south, where a sea wall rises from the shore, while the massive land walls and moat close it off on the north and east.

History of Acre's Fortifications

Acre has been fortified for thousands of years, and historical sources trace walls in the city back to the Hellenistic period after Alexander the Great in the 4th century BCE. The walls were repaired and rebuilt many times through the ages, and the Crusaders surrounded the city with double walls when Acre was their capital. These fell into ruin after the Mamluks took the city in 1291.

- **Zahir al-Umar (1750–1751):** The ruler of the Galilee, Zahir al-Umar al-Zaydani, made Acre his capital and built the first wall of the modern city in 1750–1751, often using the remains of the Crusader walls. It stood 10 to 13 metres high, with a land side and a sea side.
- **Ahmad Pasha al-Jazzar (1775–1814):** After Zahir al-Umar's fall, the Ottoman governor al-Jazzar reinforced the walls from 1775, and after Napoleon's siege he built a new, much thicker land wall designed to withstand artillery, with work continuing until 1814. He also built the citadel between 1775 and 1805.

The walls seen today date from 1750 to 1814, and among the many restorations the city's walls underwent over the centuries, the Islamic-era works gave Acre its strongest defences.

Structure: Walls, Towers and Moat

The wall surrounds the city for about **2,835 metres**. Its top is so wide that children can comfortably play football on it, especially in the south-eastern section. Visitors climb onto the wall by wide paved ramps.

Small watchtowers along the top overlook the whole city, including **Burj al-Kurayyim** (the Vineyard Tower, in the north-west), **Burj al-Kommandar** (the Commander's Tower, in the north-east), **Burj al-Sanjaq** (the Flag Tower, in the south-west, home to Acre's lighthouse), **Burj al-Hadid** and **Burj al-Khazna** (the Treasury Tower) on the north side of the citadel.

Outside the land wall runs a very wide and deep **moat**, and beyond it a second, outer wall, so that the two walls run parallel from east to west with the moat between them. In wartime the moat could be filled with seawater, making it impossible for attackers to cross. The **Land Gate** in the east was the city's main entrance, and the **Sea Gate** in the south led to the harbour.

Napoleon's Siege of 1799

Acre reached the height of its glory in 1214 AH / 1799 CE, when it halted the advance of Napoleon Bonaparte, who had conquered Egypt and the coast of Palestine. He besieged the city by land and sea and launched fierce attacks on its walls for about two months, from late March to late May 1799, making his base on Tell al-Fukhar outside the city, which has since also been known as Napoleon's Hill.

Napoleon was forced to withdraw thanks to the steadfastness of al-Jazzar and his defenders and the help of the British fleet under Sir Sidney Smith, which captured the French flotilla carrying Napoleon's heavy siege guns and moved its cannon into Acre to strengthen its walls. With this victory, Napoleon's dreams of conquering the East collapsed.

Rebuilding Under Sulayman Pasha

Al-Jazzar was succeeded by **Sulayman Pasha "the Just"**, who repaired the damage Napoleon's campaign had done to the walls, fortifications and buildings of the city. He rebuilt the al-Majadala Mosque and the Sea Mosque, brought water to Acre from the springs of al-Kabri, and in 1816 laid out a garden named after his daughter Fatima, planted with flowers and fruit trees, with four pavilions and a pool fed by the Kabri springs. A wooden jetty was built in the harbour to help travellers board and land from boats, and the White Market was rebuilt.

Later Sieges and Bombardments

- **1831–1832:** The Egyptian army of Ibrahim Pasha besieged Acre for about six months before taking it, causing heavy damage.
- **1840:** A British, Austrian and Ottoman fleet bombarded Acre and drove out the Egyptian forces; an explosion in the city's powder magazine caused great destruction.
- **British Mandate:** The British used the citadel as a central prison, where many Palestinian fighters of the 1936–1939 revolt were held and some executed.

The Walls and the Nakba of 1948

In May 1948 Zionist forces besieged and attacked Acre, and the city fell on 17 May 1948. Most of its Arab inhabitants were driven out, and those who remained were concentrated inside the old walled city, which became a Palestinian enclave. New Jewish neighbourhoods grew outside the walls, and the city was divided between the historic Old City and the new city beyond the walls.

The Walls Today (2026)

Today the walls are Acre's best-known landmark and a destination for visitors, and young people still dive into the sea from the sea wall. Inside them, the Palestinian residents of the Old City face pressure on housing, with many historic houses owned by the state and sold or leased to investors, and a struggle to preserve the Arab character of their city.

UNESCO and Legal Protection

In 2001 UNESCO inscribed the **Old City of Acre** on the World Heritage List as an outstanding example of a historic walled town of the Ottoman period, preserving its walls, citadel, mosques, khans and baths above the largely intact remains of the Crusader city below.

Frequently Asked Questions About the Walls of Acre

Who built the walls of Acre?

Zahir al-Umar al-Zaydani built the present walls in 1750–1751, and Ahmad Pasha al-Jazzar strengthened and rebuilt them between 1775 and 1814.

How long are the walls of Acre?

About 2,835 metres, surrounding the Old City on land and sea.

Did Napoleon capture Acre?

No. Napoleon besieged Acre for about two months in 1799 but failed to take it, thanks to al-Jazzar's defence, the strength of its walls and the help of the British fleet.

What are the towers of the walls of Acre?

They include Burj al-Kurayyim, Burj al-Kommandar, Burj al-Sanjaq, Burj al-Hadid and Burj al-Khazna.

Are the walls of Acre a UNESCO World Heritage Site?

Yes. They are part of the Old City of Acre, inscribed on the World Heritage List in 2001.

Conclusion

The walls of Acre have watched over the city for nearly three centuries, from Zahir al-Umar's building to al-Jazzar's defiance of Napoleon. They withstood cannon and siege, but could not prevent the Nakba of 1948, when most of Acre's people were driven out. Today they guard a Palestinian Old City still struggling to keep its identity, and stand, as the saying goes, as the walls that "do not fear the roar of the sea".

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