

Israel's 10 Best-Kept Secrets

Even If you don't trek to the usual Holy Land hotspots, you'll find God's footprints in these biblically rich sites

Few places compare with Israel. Though the country is relatively small (about the size of New Jersey), it's filled from end to end with biblical history. If there is *one* place on earth that every Christian needs to visit, it's Israel. Why? Because being there is the only way to physically experience God's eternal story that runs through the ancient sites and historical wonders. It is the land where the Bible comes alive.

Many Christians who go to Israel are challenged to new levels of discipleship. Some are healed, renewed, empowered and blessed. The experience of one pilgrim sums it up best: "It was like visiting with the Lord in His home," she said. When you go, visit the well-known sites but also set aside time to take in some of the land's best-kept secrets. Here are 10 we suggest you see. You won't be disappointed.



1. TEL DAN

Seconds into Israel's

Tel Dan Nature Reserve and all else is forgotten. You'll want to get lost under shady trees as you're serenaded by the sounds of the rushing Dan River—the Jordan's largest source—and its flowing streams and gentle springs. But if you keep going, you'll come across three sites: the ruins of the Canaanite city once captured by the tribe of Dan; one of the "high places" from the time of King Jeroboam; and the ancient Canaanite "Gate of the Three Arches."



2. •Bet Guvrin-Maresha National Park

If you have a passion for archaeology, visit Bet Guvrin and discover what many tourists haven't. Take the opportunity to crawl through and explore underground caves, and even dig for pottery and other artifacts. You can also imagine what it felt like to be a gladiator while standing inside the nearby Roman amphitheatre.



3. •EIN GEDI

In 1 Samuel, the Bible says that David fled from Saul and went to

Ein Gedi—an oasis near the shores of the Dead Sea. Just as David did, take refuge there for a while from the worries of day-to-day life. Stop to sit and pray next to one of the breathtaking waterfalls, or climb higher and view the Dead Sea from a unique perspective.



4. MASADA/HERODIUM

Not far from Ein Gedi is the mighty fortress Masada, built by the Roman leader Herod, who tried to kill Jesus as an infant (see Matt. 2:13-18). Masada is also where a group of Hebrew Zealots fled after Rome destroyed Jerusalem in A.D. 70. There, they held out for three years against besieging Roman forces. Though most of the 960 defenders committed suicide rather than be taken alive by the Romans, Masada has become a modern symbol of Jewish survival.

Even though Masada isn't exactly a "best-kept secret" (it's the second-most popular destination for Jewish tourists visiting Israel), it's still a historically rich site that's

off the beaten path for many tourists. Not far from Jerusalem and Bethlehem is Herodium—another palace-fortress of Herod's. Both sites feature ruins such as bathhouses, synagogues and Herod's living quarters.

5. NIMROD'S FORTRESS

Located on a rising ridge 2,640 feet above sea level, with stunning views of the northern Golan and Mount Hermon, are the preserved ruins of Nimrod's Fortress. This medieval site changed hands during the 12th and 13th centuries, though it was primarily an Islamic stronghold against the Crusaders. With much of its stone architecture still intact, the fortress (which gets its name from the biblical figure in Gen. 10:8-9) is a great opportunity for family exploration, especially the site's secret passageway.



6. HAIFA

For tourists looking for locations ingrained with biblical significance, Haifa may not seem an obvious choice. However, it was particularly important in the life of the prophet Elijah, who fought a spiritual battle there on Mount Carmel against the false prophets of Baal. Elijah's cave is located there, and though there are several theories about the locations where he isolated himself, the oldest and most recognized belief places the cave at the foot of Mount Carmel in the vicinity of the Haifa beach. The cave's walls are covered in writings left by visitors and include an inscription by a Roman soldier named Germanous.

As a city along the coast of the blue Mediterranean Sea, Haifa is also a wonderful spot for a day of relaxation on one of its beaches. Particularly during the morning hours, drive up Mount Carmel for a view of the sea and the terraced Baha'i Gardens.

7. MOUNT BENTAL

A site of more recent history is Mount Bental, part of an extinct volcano in the lush, green Golan Heights. It was here in the Yom Kippur War of 1973 that Israel fought and won one of the largest tank battles in military history. Syrians attacked the Israeli 7th Armored Brigade with more than 1,000 tanks, against only 160 Israeli tanks. The Israeli tanks were reduced to seven before the Syrians eventually retreated. Today visitors travel to the site and remember the Israeli courage and heroism exhibited here. Mount Bental overlooks Syria, and along its top visitors can walk through Israeli bunkers used during the war.

8. JERICHO

Jericho is a West Bank city with an incredible past. It was here that the city walls fell flat before Joshua and the Israelites (see Josh. 6). The ancient city had a circumference of about 1 mile and an estimated population of around 2,500 at the time of Joshua's conquest. The Judean Desert, or "wilderness of Jerusalem," surrounds Jericho.

Throughout the centuries, bandits, thieves, outlaws and freedom fighters have sought sanctuary from authorities in this desolate region. First Samuel 23:19 calls this area Jeshimon and associates it with David, naming it as his hiding place when he was pursued by King Saul. Take a little time to stroll the excavated ruins, and then ride a cable car up the Mount of Temptation where Jesus is said to have been tempted by Satan (see Matt. 4). If there's time, drive into another part of town where a tree stands in memory of the short tax collector Zacchaeus, who climbed above the crowd so he could see Jesus.

9. YAD HASHMONA

Yad Hashmona, in the Judean Hills, isn't far from Israel's Ben Gurion International Airport. It's not likely to be on the

tourism map when it comes to popular places to visit in the country—but it should be. It is a community of mostly Israelis who believe in Jesus as their Messiah. Named after eight Jewish refugees who were handed over to the Nazis by Finland in 1942, it's also the site of a biblical-era village with olive and wine presses, ritual bath, Galilean synagogue and burial cave.

10. MOUNT TABOR

Desperate for a new perspective? Look no further than Mount Tabor. It rises 1,650 feet above the Jezreel Valley in the Galilee region. Due to its strategic location along north-south routes, it has been an important natural fortress since ancient times. Some claim it is the site of the Transfiguration of Christ in Matthew 17:1-3. The mountaintop view of the land and clusters of cities and towns below is breathtaking.

Driving up, it's easy to imagine what Barak and his 10,000 men saw as they ascended the mountain at the command of Deborah to defeat Sisera and the Canaanite army (see Judg. 4:12-16). At the top, visit the Franciscan monastery. The walls around the mountain's summit date to the 13th century.

Sarah Stegall's decision in January to move from Florida to Israel and teach middle and high school students led to a Holy Land love story. She is now engaged to a fellow teacher who moved to Israel from California.