Mount Arbel (181 meters above sea level), rises some 390 meters above orchards and vineyards. The western, lower part of the plateau is the fertile Arbel Valley, home to sloping moderately upward from the southwest to the northeast. The Lower Galilee, on the Arbel Plateau – a basalt and limestone highland – these are the Arbel: a nature reserve and national park, a gem of nature and landscape and an ancient heritage site unparalleled in Israel.

Flora and Fauna

Many species of mammals find shelter in the national park, taking advantage of its water sources and rocky foothills. The most common are wolves, hyenas and martens. Families of hyenas inhabit the cliffs and various species of bats hide during the day in the caves. They include the European free-tailed bat (Tadarida teniotis), Egyptian slit-faced bat (Nycteris thebacea) and the mouse-tailed bat. Lesser kestrels (Falco naumanni) can be found during nesting season in the more remote cliffs, along with long-legged buzzards (Buteo turtlei). The many rock doves in the area gave the lower part of the Arbel Stream its Arabic name, Wadi Haman (Dove Stream). The many rock doves in the area gave the lower part of the Arbel Stream its Arabic name, Wadi Haman (Dove Stream).

In the nineteenth century, the zoologist Henry Baker Tristram found the rock crevices of the Arbel are the only habitat on earth for the rare bird with a rather long beak, can be seen ‘crawling’ along the cliffs as it hunts the insects on which it lives. Its grey feathers make it difficult to spot against the rock wall, except when it spreads its scarlet-daubed wings.

The rock crevices of the Arbel are the only habitat on earth for a small snail, Cnosta gerasenitana. The shell of this mollusk, between 13 and 20 millimeters long, is ribbed, and is closed with a flap except when the small partial protrudes from it.

In the early centuries, the zoologist Benny Tristram identified dozens of nests of Griffon vultures (Gyps fulvus) and cinereus vulture (Aegypius monachus) here, and even reported seeing a large Syrian Harrier lumbering out of the brush.

The reserve has relatively few trees. The lone carob tree at the top of Mount Arbel, visible for miles around, is a remnant of a species of trees that once flourished here. The slopes are covered with Cistus arietinum (Lotus arietinum), with their spiked, crooked branches. Willows also grow along the Arbel stream. The beautiful blue blossoms of the wild hyacinth (Hyacinthoides orientalis) appear here in January and a month later, the crown anemone (Anemone coronaria) daubs the slopes red. Pink Egyptian honey (Hecataea lucida) appears in spring; then comes the turn of the magnificent sun-eye tulip (Tulipa gesneriana), hairy pink flax (Linum pubescens) and the blue lupine (Lupinus piizicus).

Vere popular trees find their homes in the rock crevices, such as the splendid centaury (Centauraea scoparia), a spiky plant with large pink flowers, and pendulous pink (Dianthus pendulus), the ground-hugging Rosularia erecta with its circle of deep green leaves, white bedstraw (Galium canum), as well as ferns, including the southern maidenhair fern (Adiantum capillus-veneris), Cheloneste acentro and Cosverina evelin.

History

According to a tradition from the Hasmonaean period, Arbel was the home of the sage Nitay after whom Mount Nitay was named. Nitay is best known for his adage: “Keep thee far from an evil neighbor and consort not with the worldly and live not in riotous excess.” (Midrash, Abodah 1, 7). The name Arbel is also mentioned in the Haemonian period as one of the conquests of the Seleucid ruler Bacchides on his way to Jerusalem, as his army pitched their tents before Masaloth, which is in Arbel, and after they had won it, they slew many people (1 Macc. 9: 2).

The historian of the Roman period, Josephus Flavius, is the only source for a description of the battle between the Galilean Zealots, who barricaded themselves at Arbel, and Herod the Great, in 37 BCE. Josephus relates that Marc Antony had sent Herod to suppress a rebellion by Jews from the “village of Arbele” who were "...lurking in caves...opening up onto mountain precipices [that] were inaccessible from any quarter, except by some tortuous and extremely narrow paths leading up to them; the cliff in front of them dropped three down..." (Josephus, War 1: 105, 310). Herod overcame the rebels only after he had the best of his warriors lowered to the cases in cages suspended by ropes, from which the zealots became convenient targets for their fiery brands and arrows. The Zealots fought to the death; Josephus describes one old man who, rather than surrender, closed his ears to the screams of his wife and his seven sons, killed them and threw them into the gorge, jumping after them to his own death.

In the early first century CE, Jesus of Nazareth preached and performed miracles in the Valley of Ginnsor at the foot of the Arbel, moving between Migdal and Capernaum with his disciples and followers. Some Christian traditions locate the site of those miracles in the Valley of Arbel. In 62 CE, Josephus, who was also the commander of the Great Revolt in the Galilee, fortified the cave-village of Arbel in preparation for the revolt. Findings indicate that the rebels did not make do only with the caves on Mount Arbel. They also barricaded themselves on the slopes of Mount Nitay, where a wall was discovered that was apparently their first line of defense against the Romans. The many ardent battles for freedom that took place at Arbel may be the origin of the tradition that the battle of the end of Days will take place there after the coming of the Messiah.

It appears that this early tradition is allied to that at the time of Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi in the second century CE.

“Rabbi Hiyya Rabbah and Rabbi Shimon ben Halala were walking in the Arbel Valley at the break of morning before the light of day. They watched the dawn as the light began to shine: Rabbi Hiyya, the great one in wisdom, said to Rabbi Halifza, ‘Rabbi, so too unfolds the Redemption of Israel – in the beginning, little by little. And the more it progresses, it increases and grows’.” (Menahem son of Amiel shall hold sway his vengeance and beauty in full array” (Menahem son of Amiel is a messianic figure).

After the destruction of the Second Temple, a family of priests of the order of Yoshua settled at Arbel. In those days Arbel became known for its production of particularly strong flax, as opposed to Bet She’an, where delicate flax was produced. During the Talmudic period, Arbel was a well-off town with a grand synagogue.

Remnants of the medieval and later settlement have been identified at Arbel, on the northern outskirts of Mezub-Arbel. Some say that ancient Arbel was located at Vadim Rains (Hebrew Rains) on the eastern slopes of Mount Nitay, near the stream, and that it moved to the site where Inbal Rains now stand during the Middle Ages. Medieval Jewish and Muslim travelers located at Arbel and it is surrounded by the tombs of various revered figures, albeit without historical foundation.

Mount Nitay, view from a cave in the Arbel Cliff

Mount Arbel, view from the Hawks of Nitay

Flora of Mount Arbel. TheMount Arbel, view from the Hawks of Nitay

Flora of Mount Arbel. The

Mount Arbel, view from the Hawks of Nitay

Flora of Mount Arbel. The

Mount Arbel, view from the Hawks of Nitay

Flora of Mount Arbel. The

Mount Arbel, view from the Hawks of Nitay

Flora of Mount Arbel. The

Mount Arbel, view from the Hawks of Nitay

Flora of Mount Arbel. The

Mount Arbel, view from the Hawks of Nitay

Flora of Mount Arbel. The

Mount Arbel, view from the Hawks of Nitay

Flora of Mount Arbel. The

Mount Arbel, view from the Hawks of Nitay

Flora of Mount Arbel. The

Mount Arbel, view from the Hawks of Nitay

Flora of Mount Arbel. The

Mount Arbel, view from the Hawks of Nitay

Flora of Mount Arbel. The

Mount Arbel, view from the Hawks of Nitay

Flora of Mount Arbel. The

Mount Arbel, view from the Hawks of Nitay

Flora of Mount Arbel. The
The synagogue’s façade faced east, which conformed to Jewish law but was a rarity in Galilee synagogues. The façade apparently had one doorway hewn out of a single rock, of which one very impressive pillar remains. Other parts of the doorway, adorned with vegetal patterns, are still scattered around. A large courtyard east of the building was paved with basalt slabs.

The early building seems to have been destroyed at some point, replaced by a new synagogue apparently in the sixth century CE, built of mud-bricks, some of which are still visible. The later synagogue is very different from its predecessor, although the builders use many items from the older structure (integrated into the foundations of walls). The main changes were the addition of round niches in the southern wall. Facing Jerusalem for the Torah shrine and a platform for Torah-reading. The stone flooring was also renewed. A doorway added in the northern wall allows to the construction of another façade that transformed the building’s axis from lengthwise to broad, giving it the north–south orientation more common to Galilean synagogues. The courtyard was extended northward and abutted two lengthwise halls with vaulted roofs.

The synagogue was apparently destroyed in a fire in 749 CE, perhaps resulting from the earthquake that destroyed many sites along the Syrian-African rift in that year. Jewish sources call the quake “the earthquake of the seventh generation” because it occurred in a Sabbatical year.

The Cave Fortress (Qala’at Ibn Ma’an)

The Arbel Cliff featured eight cave complexes (they can be seen at the foot of the cliff as you walk the path to the fortress).

Some of the caves are natural, karstic caves, which were hewn on a number of levels to make them suitable for habitation. They are clustered and protected by their cliff-side location. At their center is a water system; some have ritual immersion baths. Some were also used in later periods (Byzantine, Mamluk and Ottoman).

Visitors who view the fortress from the top of the cliff rather than going down to it, can see similar clusters of caves on the slopes of Mount Nitai to the north.

Lookouts and Rest Areas

The Karnei Lookout – Located along the ‘blue’ trail on the eastern slope of the Arbel Cliff, east of the Carob Lookout, this lookout offers a view to the Sea of Galilee, the Galician Mountain and the eastern part of the Upper and Lower Galilee. It is dedicated to the memory of Brig. Gen. Yosef Luntz.

The Kinneret Lookout – Located along the ‘blue’ trail on the eastern slope of the Arbel Cliff, east of the Carob Lookout, this lookout offers a view of the Sea of Galilee (Kinneret) in all its glory, the Galician Mountain and the cities of Tiberias and Safed, as well as communities around the lake and on the way to the Upper Galilee.

The Labor Battalion Rest Area – Located at the foot of the Arbel Cliff, near the road around the Sea of Galilee, this rest area is in the remains of a quarry from the 1920s, from which the ‘blatton’ of road-builders heaved by the legendary Joseph Trumpeldor dug the rock for the bed of the Tiberias–Tabgha road.

Touring Routes

The map in this brochure refers to the routes on the Arbel Cliff.

To visit the Arbel Stream along its entire length, use the Lower Galilee trail map.

Please note the recommended way to walk the trails:

The ‘red’ trail ascends to the entrance area to the fortress and the caves and recommended for ascent. The ‘black’ trail descends from the Carob Lookout to the fortress and the caves and is recommended for descends only.

To the Carob Lookout

Time: 10 minutes.

This is a loop trail including a steep descent and ascent. It is suitable for experienced hikers. The recommended route is as follows:

The trail begins at the parking lot and continues to the Carob Lookout and returns to the parking lot.

To the Fortress and the Caves

Time: 3 hours.

This loop trail includes a steep ascent and descent. It is suitable for experienced hikers. The recommended route is as follows:

The route begins at the parking lot, continues to the Carob Lookout and returns to the parking lot.

To the Labor Battalion Rest Area

Time: About 2 hours.

The route follows a steep slope. The route begins at the parking lot, continues to the Carob Lookout on the black trail and continues along that trail for about another 200 meters to its junction with the ‘blue’ trail. The ‘blue’ trail reaches the Kinneret Lookout and continues down the slope to the Labor Battalion Rest Area.

To the Arbel Spring

Time: 2–3 hours.

Note: You should have a vehicle waiting on the road near Hamam. The trail follows a steep slope requiring use of hand and foot-holds in the cliff. The trail begins at the parking lot and continues to the ‘black’ trail to the Carob Lookout. From there it continues to the caves and down to the Arbel Spring.

To the Synagogue

Time: 30 minutes.

This loop trail is short and easy. It begins at the small parking lot at the side of the road that skirts Moshav Arbel. It reaches the synagogue and the Arbel talmudic-era village and returns to the parking lot.

To the Arbel Spring

Time: 1.5–2 hours.

The trail begins at the small parking lot at the side of the road skirting Moshav Arbel. It reaches the synagogue and the Arbel talmudic-era village and continues down a fairly steep path via burial caves to the Arbel Spring (along the ‘green’ trail).

From the Synagogue to the Arbel Spring

Time: 2–3 hours.

Note: You should have a vehicle waiting on the road near Hamam.

The route begins at the small parking lot at the side of the road skirting Moshav Arbel. It reaches the synagogue and the Arbel talmudic-era village and continues down a fairly steep path via burial caves to the Arbel Spring.