

Mamshit National Park

www.parks.org.il | *3639 | 



World Heritage Site: “The Incense Route – Desert Cities in the Negev”

“The Incense Route – Desert Cities in the Negev” was inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in its Durban, South Africa committee meeting on July 15, 2005. The listing includes the Incense Route from Moa in the Arava to Avdat in the Negev Highlands (about 65 kilometers) and the ancient cities of Avdat, Haluza, Shivta, and Mamshit. Most of the inscribed road is included within the Tzinim Cliff Nature Reserve and the desert cities are national parks.

The Incense Route begins in Oman and Yemen, and spans a total of 2,400 kilometers. It passes through Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the Negev, and ends at the port of Gaza. The road and its branches bustled from the third century BCE to the fourth century CE.

The UNESCO World Heritage Committee inscribed the Incense Route based on the following criteria:

The Incense Route is unique testimony to a culture that has disappeared (Criterion 3).

The Nabatean cities and commercial routes constitute persuasive evidence of the economic, social, and cultural significance of incense – frankincense and myrrh – and of spices and various merchandise transported from the Far East and the Arabian Peninsula to the Hellenistic and Roman world. In addition to the road’s commercial nature, it also impacted ancient cultures, bringing together people and worldviews.

The road is a globally valuable and extraordinary example of traditional land use (Criterion 5).

The silent remains of the cities, the forts, the road and the milestones, the caravansaries and the sophisticated agricultural systems along the Incense Route in the Negev are an example of outstanding universal value of the hospitable desert environment that flourished here for 700 years.

The Roman historian Pliny the Elder described the route in the first century CE thus:

“After the frankincense is collected, it is conveyed by camel to Sabota, and one of the gates of the city is opened to receive the merchandise. The kings enacted a permanent law that it is a serious crime for a camel bearing frankincense to divert from the main road. In Sabota, the priests levy a tithe on the frankincense for the god known as Sabis and it is not permitted to bring the medicaments to the market before payment of the tithe. In fact, this was done to cover public expenses, because on certain days of the year, the god hosts grand feasts. From here, the merchandise may be conveyed through the land of the Gebbanites only, and therefore tax must be paid to the king of this people as well. Their capital is Thomna, which is 1487 miles [2380 km] from Gaza in Judea, located on the coast of the Mediterranean. The journey is divided into 65 stages [36.6 km], at each of which is a rest station for the camels. Regular portions of frankincense must be paid to the priests of the lands, their kings, and their scribes. In addition, portions are also taken by guards at gates and their servants. In addition to these, they must pay all the way, in one place for water, elsewhere for a place at the way station, and also for food. Thus, expenses come to 688 denarii even before reaching the Mediterranean. Then our imperial tax officials must be paid again. Because of this, the price of good frankincense can be six denarii per liter, average frankincense can be five denarii, and the third type can be three denarii” (Pliny, Historia Naturalis, 12:32: 63-65)

Mamshit National Park, Tel: 08-6556478

Welcome to Mamshit National Park World Heritage Site



The Eastern Church

Mamshit National Park is located approximately seven kilometers east of Dimona, on the main road to Eilat. The 142 hectares park encompasses the ancient Nabatean, Roman and Byzantine city of Mamshit, which extended over four hectares, as well as Wadi Mamshit and its ancient dams.

The History of the City

Mamshit is situated on one of the important branches of the Incense Route – on the junction of the main roads that linked the Arava (via the Scorpions Ascent and Tamara) the Dead Sea (Via the Tamar Fort and the Tamar and Peres ascents), Petra and the Gulf of Eilat, with the coastal plain and the Hebron mountains.

Mamshit appears in the ancient mosaic floor of Madaba, Jordan, which depicts the land of Israel in the Byzantine period (the fourth to the seventh centuries CE). A permanent settlement was first established here during the middle Nabatean period, in the mid-first century CE, apparently at the top of the hill (near the police building, number 8 on the map). Most of the city’s buildings – mainly grand private dwellings – were built in the late Nabatean period, in the second century CE, after the Nabatean kingdom was annexed to Rome in 106 CE.

The city’s buildings continued in use during the Late Roman period, in the third and fourth centuries CE, and at the end of the third century CE it was surrounded by a wall. Apparently at the beginning of the fifth century CE, two churches were built here, the Western Church and the Eastern Church (numbers 5 and 7) – which were in use until the Persian invasion (614 CE) or the Arab conquest (636 CE). After that time, Mamshit ceased to exist.

In 1936 the British Mandate forces built a police station for its camel-back desert patrols to monitor the Bedouin and prevent Jews from traveling the area with an eye to settling it.

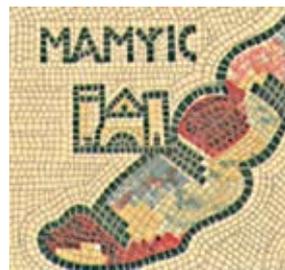
In 1966, the site was declared national park, and in 2005, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) inscribed it as a World Heritage Site as part of “the Incense Route – Desert Cities in the Negev.”

The History of Research

The site was first surveyed by the explorers U.J. Seetzen (1807), E. Robinson (1838) and E.H. Palmer (1871).

The first thorough survey and mapping was carried out by A. Musil in 1901. In 1914, the archaeologists Woolley and Lawrence (“of Arabia”) resurveyed and mapped the area. In 1937, G.E. Kirk and P.L.O. Guy undertook a detailed survey for the British Palestine Exploration Fund.

In 1956, the first trial soundings were made at the site by S. Appelbaum on behalf of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. In 1956 and 1957, large-scale excavations were carried out under the direction of A. Negev of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and by the National Parks Authority. Professor Negev’s excavations and research at Nabatean sites in the Negev revealed the fundamentals for understanding the world of the Nabateans and the Negev cities. In 1989, Negev renewed his excavations, which were continued in 1993 and 1994 by T. Erickson-Gini for the Israel Antiquities Authority. In those excavations an early structure, built in the second century CE and in use until the earthquake of 363 CE, was discovered under the floor of the police station. In addition, structures were unearthed from the beginning of Mamshit’s settlement in the first century CE. They had been demolished to construct another building (number 10 on the map) in the second half of the second century CE.



Mamshit on the Madaba Map



The central inscription in the Western Church

Rules of Safety and Behavior at Mamshit National Park

- Follow all instructions on signs and by staff.
- Do not harm the antiquities, do not climb or scratch them.
- Drive and park in authorized places only according to the signs.
- Walk only on marked paths.
- Do not enter areas that are not yet open to the public.
- Keep the area clean.

Writer and editor: Dr. Tsvika Tsuk; **Consultant:** Dr. Tali Erickson-Gini;

Photographs: INPA Archive; **Translator:** Miriam Feinberg Vamosh;

Production: Adi Greenbaum;

© The Israel Nature and Parks Authority



Tour of the National Park

1. The caravan inns – (first to fourth centuries CE). Two large complexes outside the walls of the city that apparently served as inns for commercial caravans that passed through the region.

2. The gate – Built during the Late Roman period, when the city was surrounded by a 900-meter-long wall. This wall was widened in the Byzantine period after the earthquake of 363 CE. The gate consisted of two towers and a passage, whose ceiling was supported by three arches. The gate was burned and destroyed in the seventh century CE. This gate, with its towers, appears on the Madaba Map as the symbol of the city.

3. “The wealthy house” – A grand building in the center of which is a rectangular courtyard surrounded by rooms. In the southwestern corner of the courtyard is a stairwell that led to the second story (closed to visitors). A round installation topped with a half-dome was the place for the household water jar. The northern rooms were residential. At their entrances were column bases and typical



The courtyard in the center of the “wealthy house”

Nabatean capitals, and their walls had niches that served as closets.

4. The tower – A square structure, originally three stories tall. On the ground floor a well-preserved room was found with arches (typical of Nabatean architecture, which did not use wood), which supported stone ceiling slabs. An impressive stairwell leads to the second story from which you have a view of ancient Mamshit, the Wadi Mamshit, the ancient dam, Mount Tzayad in the south and the city of Dimona on the west.

5. The Western Church – “Church of St. Nilus” – The entrance to the church, through a colonnaded courtyard (atrium) was via three doors. Two rows of columns divided this basilica-shaped church into three parts – the nave and two side aisles. The pulpit was enclosed by a semicircular wall (apse), which marked the direction of prayer and the site of the altar. On either side of the apse were rooms in which rites were performed. The nave was paved with a mosaic floor featuring geometric patterns, birds, two peacocks and two dedicatory inscriptions. The central inscription reads: “*God, save your servant Nilus, lover of Jesus, who founded this building. Preserve him and his household.*”

6. Typical Nabatean dwelling

– In the center of the house is a courtyard with a cistern. A stairwell led to the second story. The courtyard had a passage to the stable, which could accommodate 16 horses. The raising of horses for riding was an important part of the city’s economy. This dwelling continued in use during the Byzantine period (as can be seen by the crosses incised on its lintels), although it was partially destroyed during construction of the Western Church.

The stable in the Nabatean dwelling



7. The Eastern Church – “Church of the Martyrs” – This church was part of a monastery complex. A staircase led to a colonnaded courtyard (atrium) built above a large cistern. The courtyard led via three doorways to a basilica-shaped church. A mosaic with two crosses was discovered in the nave – evidence that the mosaic was built before 427 CE, when crosses were no longer allowed as decorations on church floors. The apse is in the eastern part of the church. It contains three rows of benches for the clergy. Remains of receptacles for the bones of martyrs were found in the rooms that flanked the apse.

8. The police station – In 1936 this building was built east of the church atop a Nabatean building (apparently a fortress), to serve the British “desert police.” The roof affords a view of ancient Mamshit, Wadi Mamshit and its canyon, which burrows into the slopes of Mount Tzayad. Today the building is used for special events.

9. The market – A street from the days of the Nabateans, with a row of rooms on either side that served as shops. On holidays, this street turns into a colorful and lively market. Some scholars believe this was a military camp.



The market

10. The “Nabatu house” – The largest house found in the city, with an area of 2,000 square meters, it received this nickname because of its many Nabatean features. Here too are interior courtyards and staircases that led to an upper story. Next to the spacious courtyard is a large and grand stable, evidence of the wealth of the owners of this dwelling. Capitals can still be seen bearing tiny reliefs of a human head, a jug and a bull. The walls of one of the rooms are decorated with frescoes depicting Greek mythological figures. A hoard of approximately 10,800 silver coins was found in the house, dating from 75 to 200 CE.

11. The public reservoir – The reservoir (which was roofed) is located near the city wall, and measures 3x10x18 meters. It filled with rainwater that flowed through a channel from outside the city. On the right, the channel can be seen passing beneath the wall and continuing toward the reservoir.

12. The Byzantine bathhouse – Located next to the reservoir and supplied by its water. The bathhouse contained three rooms, a hot room, a tepid room and a dressing and furnace room. The red bricks and clay pipes through which the hot air flowed that heated the room can still be seen.

Wadi Mamshit and the dams – In and around the city were many water collection installations: channels, cisterns and dams. Especially outstanding are the cisterns near the larger buildings and the churches. Installations for collecting sediment for cultivation and for water storage were built opposite the city. The largest of these were three dams built by the Nabateans in Wadi Mamshit. Today only the lower Nabatean dam can be seen. It was restored during the British Mandate. Further downstream, another dam was built during the Mandate period.

“The Nabatean khan” – An overnight campground including a tent area, a giant tent for hospitality and special events, toilets, showers, lighting, cooking facilities and best of all – a desert atmosphere.