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Shiloh Photo: Yigal Tzur

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Eretz Binyamin: Leave politics behind

Joshua Bin Nun passed through here, Mark Twain cursed it and it is where bandit Abu Jilda spread fear. The Society for the Protection of Nature, Ofra field school lead guided tours from Jerusalem to Shiloh
Yigal Tzur

Eretz Binyamin is beautiful. Its Biblical scenery hides secrets, and many springs gurgle between its knolls. It is just that its geopolitics distance it from the noisy crowds, and the few who brave to roam its wide-open spaces are usually locals or reservists who are stuck in this region by chance. What a shame.

In an attempt to interest Israelis who only know of this beautiful region through media reports, mostly on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Society for the Protection of Nature recently joined forces with the Ofra field school to offer guided and guarded tours in Eretz Binyamin, for the good of the wider public.

On our way

Guided tours begin at the Hizma checkpoint, on route 437, on the outskirts of the Jerusalem neighborhood Pisgat Zeev. From here they travel in the direction of Ein Fawar (Ein Mabua, in the converted version), one of the upper springs of Wadi Kelt.

They join the Alon Road (Route 458) near Wadi Makuch, one of the nicer ones in the area (it is a firing range! Private tours need advance notice) and stop at the Maaleh Michmas settlement, that was built on the ruins of ancient Michmas. The Michmas passageway can be found in Nahal Michmas - a hidden passageway, one of the more important ones in the region for the past 3,000 years.



Ein El Arik

This passageway was used by Yehonatan son of Shaul when he overcame the Philistines, by the Assyrians when they passed through it in 800 B.C.E, and even by the British Colonel Spaulding, who led a lone division to victory over a much larger Turkish force in 1917 after he opened his Bible and read about the hidden passageway.

They go south on the Alon Road on a narrow winding road, until they arrive at Ein Mabua. The ruined concrete house is the British pump house. Next to it begins the famous aqueduct, which stretches 20 kilometers to Jericho. The Hasmoneans built it in 180 B.C.E; King Herod renovated it, added bridges and dug out tunnels. Since the aqueduct cannot carry large quantities of water, the water flows out in a waterfall and creates a small pool.

From Ein Mabua there is a footpath through the depths of Wadi Kelt, through Ein Kelt (Ein Prat) until the Greek-Orthodox monastery named for St. George (a private tour requires security coordination). From Ein Mabua the guided tour returns to the Alon road and goes north on Route 60 (Ramallah bypass road). They stop at an impressive observation post over the villages south of Ofra, including Der Dibwan and "The Monastery of the two Bears".

The monastery was built here following the Biblical story of Elisha, who came out of the Jordan and cursed the young men approaching him. Then two bears came out of the forest and killed them.

West on route 60 is the village of Beitin, identified with the ancient Beit El. On its edges is Borj Beitin - the remains of a crusader monastery, which lay on the ancient road from the Jordan and Jericho towards Beit El. Mark Twain, who visited here, complained about the rocks, which filled the road and shook his carriage.

They pass Ofra and immediately see the Shomrot - round stone structures where they used to store the harvested grapes in the warm months. The vineyard watchmen would sleep on the shomrot at night. Across from it rises Mount Chatzor, the tallest mountain in the Shomron.

The scenery changes. They pass the British police station in Wadi Harmeya (the robber's Wadi) and hear stories about Abu Jilda, a fearsome thief who operated in this area and became a literary legend. To the west is the village of Sinjil, named after the crusader knight Raymond de Saint Gilles, who breached Jerusalem in 1167. His descendants established the centuries-old village.

Continuing to the east is the village of Turmus Aya, in the heart of the Shiloh valley. Until the 1960's its residents were famous for earning their living by antiquities theft and forgery.

The surrounding Shiloh valley is laden with vineyards. It is called Sahel el Eid (the holiday valley) or Sahel el Banat (valley of the girls), in memory of the girls who would dance in the vineyards. The nearby Tel Shiloh, one of the most important places in Jewish history, can be entered for a nominal fee (despite the neglect that prevails in the place). For more details on the guided tours call 072-50-8753742 (Rachel).

This is the Biblical Shiloh, from where Joshua cried, "How long will you be slack about going and taking possession of the land". In the remains of the city there are mosaics, an observation tower and what remains (you need a lot of imagination) of the ancient tabernacle. On the southern side there is a Danish church. Its builders thought that this was where the tabernacle was located. The original church was Byzantine and on the floor we trod on amazing mosaics from the first few centuries C.E.

They head north on route 60, turning towards the cemetery of the Eli settlement and reach Ein El Arik - a relaxing spot that has pools, benches and even a hammock. After a short rest they return to the road and deviate in the direction of Maale Levona and Khan Luban - a Turkish Khan with a spring surrounded by nut trees and strawberry bushes.

That's it. From here they go south on route 60 towards Jerusalem, for the last stop of the trip. They turn westward on road 466 towards Ateret, near the Arab village of Atara.

Seven kilometers after the turn they arrive at the Um Safa forest - a forest that the British declared a nature reserve. Between the trees there are many different types of orchids. Animal life includes wild boars, porcupines and other rodents.

And from here to the starting point of our tour - the outskirts of Jerusalem.

For complete details on the Ofra Field school's tours in Eretz Binyamin call 972-2-9975516.

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