



The doorway of the Arbel synagogue

The scholar Edward Robinson described the synagogue anew in 1852. After him came other scholars – Heinrich Kohl and Carl Watzinger – pioneers in the study of the ancient Galilean synagogues who in 1905 were the first to excavate the site. From 1987 to 1989 Zvi Ilan and Abraham Izdarechet prepared the site for public visits. In 2012, the Hebrew University’s Institute of Archaeology began an architectural survey and archaeological excavations, directed by Benny Arubas. In 2020, Dror Ben-Yosef of the Israel Nature and Parks Authority conducted a trial excavation under the foundations of the heart-shaped column standing in the northeastern corner of the synagogue. The excavation uncovered a magnificent synagogue from the third–fourth centuries CE and the later period of the building (with the heart-shaped columns) from the beginning of the fifth century.

The synagogue was built in the center of the ancient settlement on the northwestern slope. To create a single level for the structure, which measured 18 x 20 m, a barrel vault was built in the northern part. The synagogue is rich in architectural elements in a variety of styles. This fact, together with a number of other finds, support the theory that the structure had several phases.

The synagogue was a two-story building. The columns in the main hall had Corinthian capitals while those in second-floor gallery featured Ionic capitals. The synagogue was mainly built of dressed limestone and therefore it stood out prominently against the surrounding basalt buildings.

The synagogue’s impressive doorway was hewn out of a single block of hard limestone brought to the site. One theory suggests that the doorway was designed in its present location at a relatively late phase of the synagogue (the end of the fourth or early fifth century CE), on the foundation of a wall of the synagogue from the Roman period; however, this has not yet been proven. It was built about 1.5 m higher than the floor of the main hall so it would conform to the level of the eastern courtyard. After the doorway was built, the aisles surrounding the main hall in the form of a horseshoe were also raised, creating a kind of stepped platform (podium). The entry steps descending to the main hall were also used as seating.

The synagogue in its early phase was apparently some 5 m longer than the one seen today. Thus it is also possible that in its early form, the synagogue was built on the familiar Galilean plan with the main facade facing south.

Scholars have suggested that the small niche in the southern wall might be a mikhrab, a typical feature in mosques that shows the direction of prayer toward Mecca. If so, the current southern wall may have been built some time during the Early Islamic period, when the building was turned into a mosque into which earlier architectural elements were integrated.

A small excavation conducted at the foot of the synagogue doorway and near the heart-shaped corner pillar reached bedrock and uncovered the remains of a structure and earlier floors. These remains may be connected to a synagogue that stood here in those days.

Refuge Caves

The Arbel Cliff and Mount Nitai contain some 350 natural (karstic) caves, at the foot of which people lived as far back as prehistoric times. Some of the caves, which are clustered in superimposed levels and protected by rocky overhangs, were widened and made suitable for dwellings.

The caves appeared on the stage of history in 38 BCE: Two years after the Romans crowned Herod king of Judah, a revolt broke out in Galilee against the new monarch. The inhabitants of Arbel and other rebels who joined them barricaded themselves in some of the caves and fought Herod’s army to the death.

The Jews of Arbel and the surroundings also used the caves as “cliff refuges” during the Great Revolt of the Jews against the Romans (66–70 CE) as described by Josephus and shown from the archaeological finds in the caves. From the path along the Arbel Cliff visitors can look at some of the occupation levels in the caves.

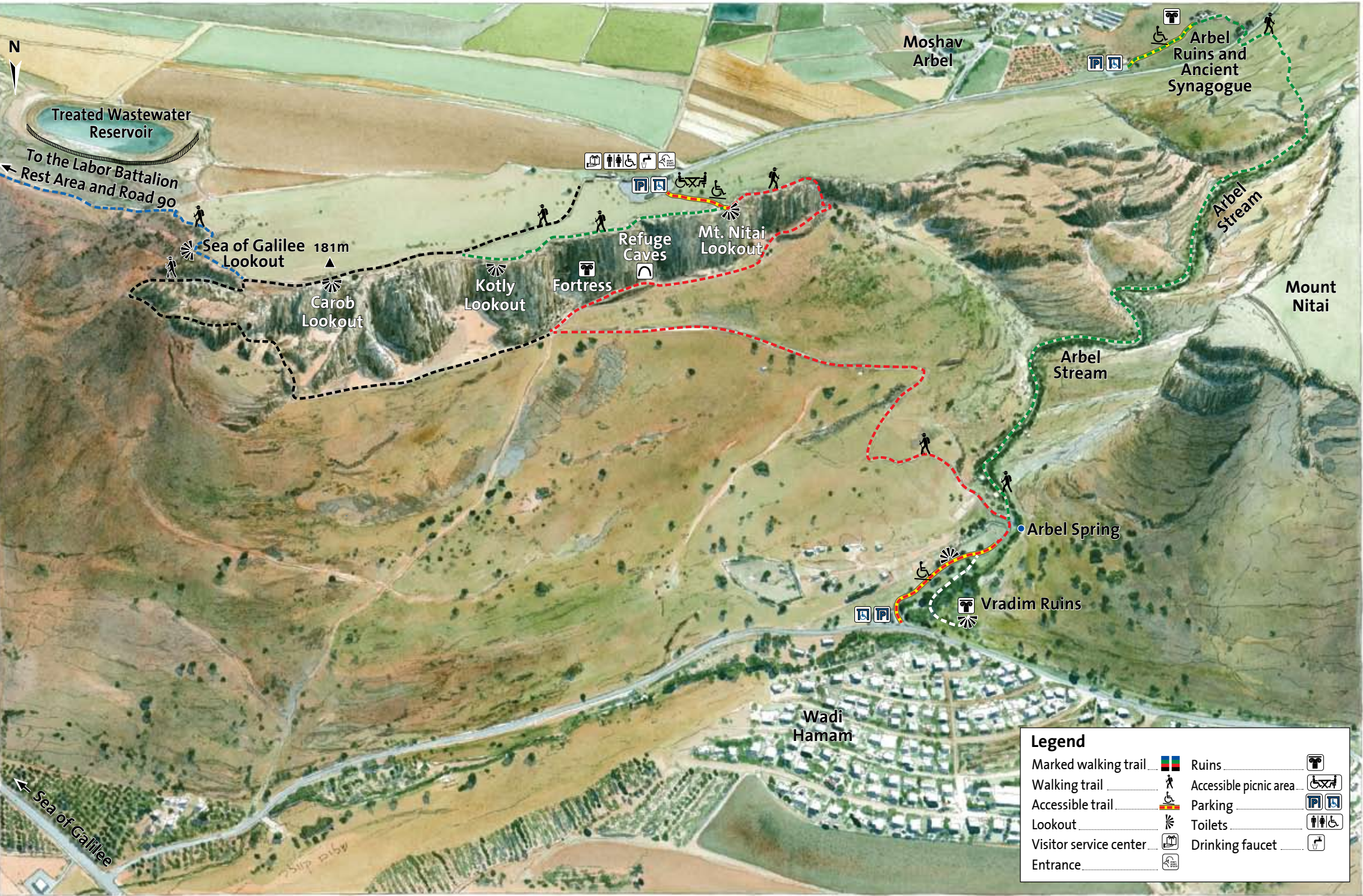
Arbel Fortress (Qala’at Ibn Ma’an)

Some of the caves served as a base for the Arbel Fortress (Qala’at Ibn Ma’an), which was apparently built here by Ali Beq, the son of the Druze Emir Fahr al-Din, a scion of the Ma’an family. The huge walls are built of alternating courses of black basalt and white limestone. The fortress had a commanding view of the Arbel Valley and the roads leading through it. In the caves in the fortress finds were also discovered from the Roman period including coins, water installations and ritual baths.

The Ottoman-era traveler Evliya Çelebi (1611–1682)



The Arbel Fortress (Qala’at Ibn Ma’an)



visited Arbel and described the fortress thus: “...At the distance of a cannon’s shot west of the city of Tiberias is an exposed cliff rising to great height in which is a fortress the Arabs call Qala’at Qa’aqa [fortress of crows]... Druze, the people of Ma’an’s son, hid [there] after they raided Migdal. Kúcuhk Ahmed Pasha [the ruler of Damascus] sent an army against them that hewed a shaft from the top of the high mountain and dropped fire into these caves. Those inside died in panic and fear and the caves were securely conquered.”

Lookouts and Rest Areas

1. The **National Park Entrance Pavilion** – Near the parking lot are tree-shaded picnic tables, some of which are accessible to persons with disabilities. Near the picnic area is a small rescue garden where you can see plants typical of this area, like fringed rue (*Ruta chalepensis*), and rare plants such as pendulous pink (*Dianthus pendulus*) and *Scrophularia xylorrhiza*. Information is available at the entrance pavilion as well as drinking water, toilets and a snack bar.
2. The **Mount Nitai Lookout** – From the parking lot a path leads northward to this lookout. The view from the lookout includes Mount Nitai, the Arbel Stream and remains of the cave village. The lookout and the path to it are accessible. On the way to it are four sarcophagi (stone coffins) with typical Roman-period decorations. Two were brought here from the ancient town of Migdal and two from the Arbel Ruins.
3. The **Carob Lookout** – This observation point at the top of the Arbel Cliff reveals the Sea of Galilee, the Golan, Mount Hermon and the center of Upper and Lower Galilee. It is dedicated to the memory of Brig. Gen. Yosef Luntz (1935–1983), who headed the Civil Administration in the Gaza Strip.
4. The **Kotly Lookout** – This lookout, which is near the intersection of the black-marked and green-marked trails, is on a curve in the Arbel Cliff, which provides an excellent view of the impressive vertical rock wall rising above the Ginossar Valley.
5. The **Kinneret Lookout** – Located on the eastern slope of the Arbel Cliff, east of the Carob Lookout, this point affords a view of the Sea of Galilee (Lake Kinneret), alongside the trail marked in blue. It reveals the Sea of Galilee in all its glory, the Golan and the cities of Tiberias and Safed, as well as communities around the lake and many other places. It is dedicated to the memory of Roi Dror (1983–2002), who died from heatstroke during orienteering training with the Israeli army’s elite Duvdevan unit, 20 m from the top of the Arbel Cliff. The trail from the Kinneret Lookout to the Labor Battalion Rest Area was blazed in his memory.
6. The **Labor Battalion Rest Area** – Located at the foot of the Arbel Cliff, near road 90, this rest area is in the remains of a quarry from the 1920s, from which the “battalion” of road-builders named after the legendary Joseph Trumpeldor dug the rock for the bed of the Tiberias-Tabgha road.



Wallcreeper

Entrance to the Hamam Ruins

The entrance to Hamam Ruins is located at the foot of the Arbel Cliff, opposite the Bedouin village of Wadi Hamam. From the parking lot, a paved and accessible path extends for about 200 m along the southern bank of the Arbel Stream. Along the way are group seating areas in the shade of eucalyptus and Christ’s-thorn jujube trees.

Visitors who continue another 100 m beyond the accessible trail will reach the Arbel Spring, from which a stream flows throughout most of the year. Willow trees grow along the stream, as well as plants typical of a moist environment, such as horsemint (*Mentha longifolia*), fool’s watercress (*Apium nodiflorum*), true watercress (*Nasturtium officinale*) and lilac chaste tree (*Vitex agnuscastus*).

Near the Arbel Spring is an intersection of trails:

1. The red-marked trail connects to the Arbel Cliff. You can ascend the cliff from here, or descend from the cliff to this point. The trail is steep and suitable for fit hikers. It is about 3 km long.
2. The green-marked trail ascends along the Arbel Stream and about 4.5 km farther along, it reaches the Arbel Ruins and the ancient synagogue of Arbel. The trail is intended for fit hikers.

The Synagogue at the Hamam Ruins

From the accessible trail, a trail leads north to the Hamam Ruins (once known as Vradim Ruins). The trail, marked and signposted, crosses the Arbel Stream and ascents via wooden steps to the ruins.

Excavations at the site, directed by Uzi Leibner from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, revealed remains of a settlement apparently founded in the Hasmonean period (first century BCE). The settlement, whose original name is unknown, developed greatly during the Early Roman period and was one of the largest settlements in the Eastern Galilee.

In the first century CE, a large, splendid building was built here, apparently a synagogue from the end of the Second Temple period. In the early third century, it was replaced by a synagogue in the Galilean style, with architectural elements carved in limestone decorating mainly the southern façade, which was the main entrance. Thanks to the building’s white limestone decorations, it stood out prominently against the black basalt homes of the settlement.

This synagogue was destroyed, and in about 300 CE it was rebuilt. Its floor was decorated with a magnificent mosaic that covered the entire main hall. The mosaic depicted biblical scenes including the Tower of Babel, Samson striking the Philistines and Pharaoh’s chariots sinking in the sea. After the village was abandoned, in about 400 CE, use of the synagogue was discontinued and shortly thereafter the building collapsed.

Remains of the synagogue in the settlement were fully uncovered. A medium-sized structure, (14.7 x 17 m), its façade faces generally southward, to Jerusalem, but its lengthwise axis tends 30 degrees to the southeast. This is apparently due to the topography – the building and the entire village having been built on the steep slope of Mount Nitai. In a structure next to the synagogue a complete olive oil press is on exhibit including basalt stone weights.



Visitor Trails

All trails begin at the Arbel National Park parking lot.

■ To the Carob Lookout

Duration: 30 minutes

The trail, back and forth (marked in black and blue). The trail is not wheelchair accessible.

The trail begins at the entrance pavilion, ascends to the Carob Lookout and returns to the parking lot. You can also return to the parking lot via the cliff trail (marked in green). The trail passes along the cliff, reaches the Mount Nitai Lookout and from there returns to the parking lot

■ To the Kinneret Lookout

Duration: 40 minutes

The trail, back and forth (marked in black and blue), is partially accessible.

From the Carob Lookout, continue east for about 200 m on the trail marked in black to where it meets the trail marked in blue. Continue on the blue-marked trail to the lookout. From the lookout, retrace your steps to the parking lot.

■ A Loop Trail: to the Fortress and the Caves

Duration: about 3 hours

Length of trail: about 3.5 km

Make sure to follow the direction of the walk as described. The trail is intended for fit hikers and includes a steep descent down the cliff and back up again, using handholds and cables for safety.

The trail begins at the entrance pavilion, continues to the Carob Lookout (marked in black), turns east and descends the cliff using handholds inserted in the rock. It then turns east and descends the cliff with handholds attached to the rock. The trail then meets the red-marked trail and turns left (not right, to the entrance to Wadi Hamam). Continue on the red-marked trail to the foot of the cliff, approximately 100 m farther, to visit the Arbel Fortress. About 400 m farther along is a sign, to the refuge caves. The caves are reached via a steep slope, with handholds and cables. At the end of the visit, return to the red-marked trail and ascend using the handholds and cables to the top of the cliff and from there, back to the parking lot.

■ From the Arbel Cliff to the Entrance to Wadi Hamam

Duration: about 3 hours

Length of trail: about 4 km

Please note: The trail on the slope is steep. Visitors will need a vehicle to pick them up at the end of the trail at the entrance to Wadi Hamam.

Begin at the trail marked in black, like the previous trail, to the point where it meets the red-marked trail. You can continue a bit to the Arbel Fortress and then return to the trail intersection and