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Arbel

National Park and Nature Reserve

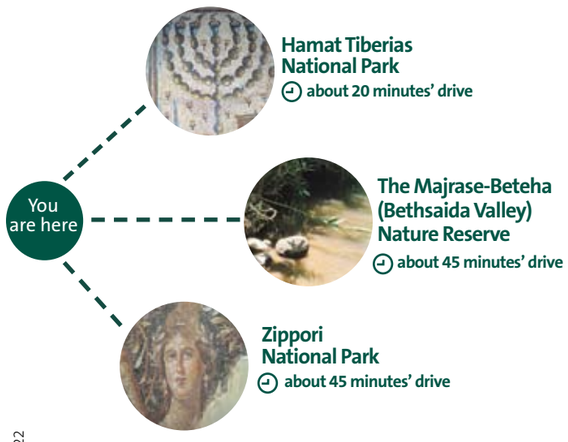
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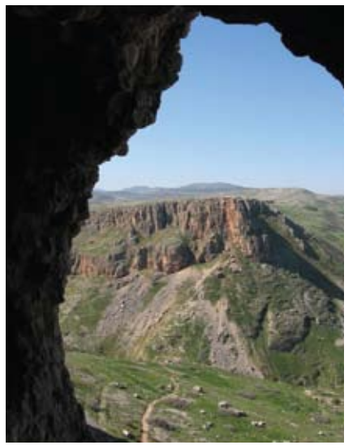
descend via the red-marked trail to the Arbel Spring. From there, continue on an accessible and paved trail to the parking lot. On the way you can visit the synagogue at the Hamam Ruins.

To the Labor Battalion Rest Area

Duration: around three hours

Please note: Visitors will need a vehicle to pick them up at the end of the trail at the Labor Battalion Rest Area.

The route begins at the entrance to the site on the trail marked in black. About 200 m farther along, it meets the trail marked in blue. The trail reaches the Kinneret Lookout and from there continues down the slope to the Labor Battalion Rest Area, located in a now-rehabilitated quarry from the early twentieth century. Picnic tables have been installed in the shade of the trees.



View of Mount Nitai from a cave in the Arbel Cliff (photo: Dr. Yinon Shavtiel)

In Memory of Roi Dror

The Kinneret Lookout was built in memory of Roi Dror by his family and friends in the Tsor scout troop and the Israel Defense Forces Duvdevan unit, with the assistance of the Israel Nature and Parks Authority.

Roi was a teen who loved nature and open spaces, a boy of inner beauty and happiness, of joy of life and love of humankind, of values, giving and devotion. He was born on March 5, 1983 at the scouts' farm near Kibbutz Ramat Yohanan. He was killed by heatstroke 20 m from the top of the Arbel Cliff on June 18, 2002, during orienteering training of the Duvdevan unit.

The trail from the Kinneret Lookout to the Labor Battalion Rest Area was blazed in his memory.

Rules of Behavior

- Use marked trails only.
- The trail to the scenic lookout is comfortable. The trail is not wheelchair accessible. The other trails are for experienced hikers only and require use of handholds and cables installed at the site. The trail marked in black is recommended for descent to the fortress. The trail marked in red is recommended for ascent from the fortress.
- Do not ride bicycles on trails intended for pedestrians.
- A recent trail map is recommended (Map no. 3 – Lower Galilee, the Valleys and the Gilboa).
- Do not go near the edge of the cliff. Beware of falling and rolling stones.
- On rainy days the trail is wet and slippery – on such days, trails intended for fit hikers are off-limits!
- Visitors are permitted at the site only during opening hours. Do not remain in or go through the national park and nature reserve after dark.
- Rappelling and cliff-climbing are prohibited. Do not climb walls or ancient structures.
- Carry 3 liters of water per day per person. Do not depend on natural water sources for drinking.
- Wear walking shoes and a hat.
- Do not harm flora, fauna or inanimate objects.
- Do not light fires in the reserve or the national park.
- Keep the area clean. Do not bury or burn trash. Please take your trash out with you.
- Dogs are allowed only on the trails to the lookouts, and must be leashed at all times.
- Drones are prohibited at the site.
- Descent to the cliff trails is permitted up to three hours before the site closes.

Text: Yaacov Shkolnik; **Information about the synagogue at Arbel**: Dr. Benny Arubas, Dr. Dror Ben-Yosef;
Information about the caves: Dr. Yinon Shivtiel
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Production: Adi Grinbaum © Israel Nature and Parks Authority

Welcome to Arbel National Park and Nature Reserve

A sheer cliff rising above the Sea of Galilee with a magnificent view of the Golan Heights and Mount Hermon; ancient settlements that left remnants of two synagogues; trails to refuge caves and a cave fortress nestled in the rock – you'll find all of these at Arbel Nature Reserve and National Park.



The Arbel Valley, seen from the Horns of Hattin

Geography

The Arbel Plateau is a basalt plateau sloping moderately upward from southwest to northeast. Its northern and eastern margins create a mighty cliff built of limestone and dolomite, rising above the Ginossar Valley and the Sea of Galilee. The highest point of the cliff, Mount Arbel (181 m above sea level), rises about 390 m above the Sea of Galilee. The cliff was created by the great Syrian-African Rift and secondary fractures across the width of the Lower Galilee.

The western, lower part of the plateau is known as the Arbel Valley. It is fertile and cultivated, with three farming communities: Kfar Zeitim, Arbel and Kfar Hittim. North of the Arbel Stream another impressive cliff rises – Mount Nitai (98 m above sea level), which contains a nature reserve, although access to it is prohibited. At the foot of Mount Nitai is the Bedouin village of Wadi Hamam.

The Arbel Stream, in which a number of springs emerge, flows within the national park. The stream, which is about 12 km long, begins near the town of Eilabun and flows into the Sea of Galilee near the town of Migdal. Remnants of a number of ancient flour mills and aqueducts dot the stream. Near one small spring near Nitai Spring, which emerges in the middle of the stream, are remnants of pomegranate, fig and mulberry orchards and vineyards.

The Arbel Nature Reserve and National Park encompasses more than 10,000 dunams (1,000 hectares), and includes the northern, eastern and western cliff of Mount Arbel, the cliff of Mount Nitai and considerable parts of the Arbel Stream. The Israel Trail and the Jesus Trail – a pilgrims' route from Nazareth to Capernaum – pass through the national park.

Flora and Fauna

Many species of mammals find shelter in the national park, taking advantage of its rocky hideaways and numerous sources of water and food. The most common are gazelles (*Gazella gazella*), wolves (*Canis lupus*), badgers (*Meles meles*), striped hyenas (*Hyaena hyaena*), and beech martens (*Martes foina*). Families of rock hyrax (*Procavia capensis*) live in the cliffs, and during the day bat species hide there, such as the European free-tailed bat (*Tadarida teniotis*), Egyptian slit-faced bat (*Nycteris thebaica*) and the lesser mouse-tailed bat (*Rhinopoma hardwickei*).

Lesser kestrels (*Falco naumanni*) can be found during nesting season in the remote cliffs, along with long-legged buzzards (*Buteo rufinus*). The many rock doves in the area gave the lower part of the Arbel Stream its Arabic name, Wadi Hamam (Dove Stream). The national park is the place to observe the blue rock-thrush (*Monticola solitarius*), a bird hardly bigger than a sparrow. The males of this species are a beautiful metallic gray-blue in color. In the winter, the wallcreeper (*Tichodroma muraria),* a rare bird with a rather long beak, can be seen hopping along the cliffs as it hunts the insects on which it lives. Its gray feathers make it difficult to spot against the rock wall, except when it spreads its scarlet-daubed wings.

The rock crevices of the Arbel and their surroundings are the only habitat on earth for a small snail, *Cristataria genezerethana*. The shell of this mollusk, between 13 and 20 mm long, is ribbed, and closed with a flap except when the snail partially protrudes from it.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the zoologist Henry Baker Tristram saw dozens of nests of Griffon vultures (*Gyps fulvus*) and cinereous vulture (*Aegypius monachus*) in the Arbel Cliff, and even reported spotting a large Syrian bear 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 that once flourished here. The slopes are covered with lotus shrubs (*Ziziphus lotus*), with their thorny, crooked branches. Christ's thorn jujubes, a spikey tree with small, spherical, edible fruit also grow on the stream banks, along with officinal storax (*Styrax officinalis*), whose light green, round fruit is toxic. Willow trees also spout on the stream banks.

The beautiful blue goblet-shaped blossoms of the wild hyacinth (*Hyacinthus orientalis*) appear here in January. Winter sees numerous clusters of cyclamens (*Cyclamen persicum*) bloom among the rocks, as well as Jerusalem spurge (*Euphorbia hierosolymitana*) a shrub with yellowish flowers. In spring, it's the turn of pink Egyptian honesty (*Ricotia lunaria*) and in other



Blooming Egyptian honesty at Arbel

seasons, the red sun's-eye tulip (*Tulipa agenensis*) opens. Hairy pink flax (*Linum pubescens*) and blue lupine (*Lupinus pilosus*) adorn the reserve in February, before spring comes.

Very rare plants grow in the rock crevices, such as the splendid centaury (*Centauria speciosa*), a spikey plant with large pink flowers. Another roseate bloom that peeks out from the cracks is pendulus pink (*Dianthus pendulus*), along with the ground-hugging *Rosularia ineata* with its circle of deep green leaves, the rare *Scrophularia xylorrhiza* as well as ferns, including the southern maidenhair (*Adiantum capillus-ceneris*), hay-scented lip fern (*Cheilanthes pteridioides*) and *Cheilanthes vellea*.

History

The name Arbel is mentioned as a place conquered during the Hasmonean period by the Seleucid General Bacchides on his way to Jerusalem, when his army "...pitched their tents before Masaloth, which is in Arbela, and after they had won it, they slew much people (1 Macc. 9, 2). According to a tradition from the Hasmonean period, Arbel was the home of the sage Nitai after whom Mount Itai was named. Nitai is best known for his adage: "Keep thee far from an evil neighbor and consort not with the wicked and lose not belief in retribution" (Mishnah, Aboth 1, 7).

The Roman-era historian Josephus Flavius identified that battle site as present-day Arbel. Some say that ancient Arbel was located at Hamam Ruins where remains of settlement and a synagogue from the time of the Talmud and the Mishnah (third–fourth centuries CE) were also found.

Josephus is the only historian who described the battle, in 38 BCE, between the Herod the Great and the Galilean Zealots who entrenched themselves at Arbel. Josephus states that Mark Antony had sent Herod to suppress a rebellion by Jews at "Arbela, a city in Galilee," besieging them in caves there (*Jewish Antiquities* 12, 421). "These caves, opening on to mountain precipices, were inaccessible from any quarter, except by some tortuous and extremely narrow paths leading up to them; the cliff in front of them dropped down into sheer ravines far below." *(Jewish War 1, 310)*. Herod overcame the rebels only after he ordered the best of his warriors lowered to the caves in cages suspended by ropes. His soldiers cast the rebels from the caves into the ravine using long spears, and hurled flaming torches at those who resisted. No one surrendered; Josephus describes one old man who, rather than give up, closed his ears to the screams of his wife and seven sons, killed them and threw them into the gorge, jumping after them to his own death, although Herod had implored him to save his sons.

In 67 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 also barricaded themselves in the caves of Mount Nitai, at the top of which a wall was built to defend the caves from a possible Roman assault from the west. The many battles that were fought here may have led to the tradition that the war of the End of Days would take place in the Arbel Valley, followed by the coming of the Messiah.

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

Medieval travelers identified Irbid Ruins, on the northern outskirts of Moshav Arbel, as Arbel, and Jewish and Muslim travelers of the day located the tombs of various revered figures at and around Arbel. The Arab name Irbid retains the sound of the Hebrew name Arbel and helped reveal the location of Arbel from the Roman and Byzantine periods.

Sites in the Reserve and the National Park

Arbel (Irbid) Ruins and the Ancient Synagogue

Remains of the ancient synagogue are situated about 1000 m west of the gate to Arbel National Park. An accessible trail leads to a wooden deck that affords a beautiful view of the decorated façade of the reconstructed doorway and the remains of the building. From there you can continue to another wooden deck inside the synagogue, at the height of the original floor.

The Arbel synagogue was mentioned in pilgrims' literature from the Middle Ages. The traveler Ya'akov ben Netanel HaCohen visited the site in the late twelfth century and described the large stone doorway of the synagogue. He, as well as the traveler Shmuel ben Rabbi Shimon (1211), wrote that the synagogue was in ruins.



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.

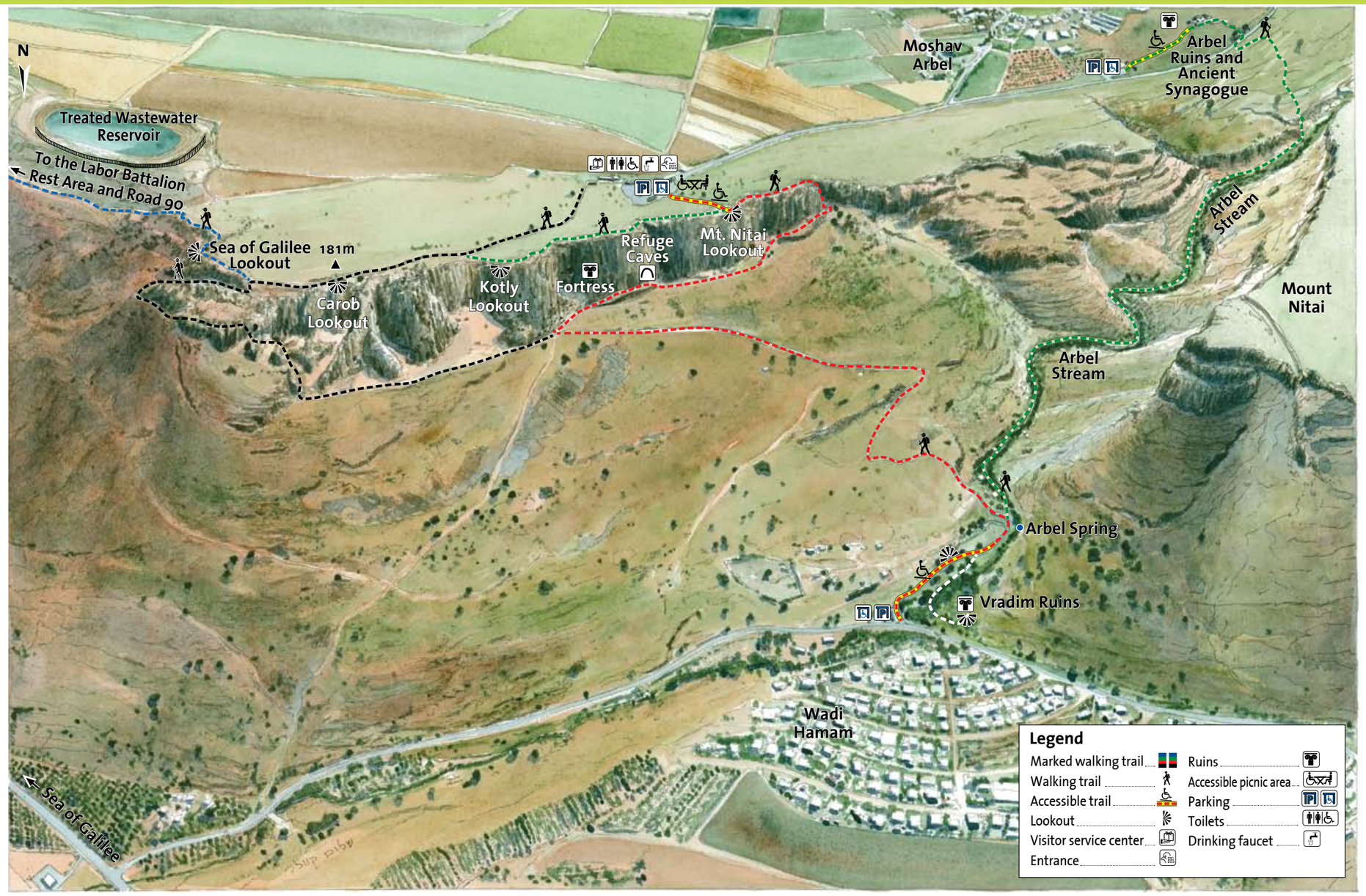
Arbel Fortress (Qala'at Ibn Ma'an)

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 Arbel Fortress (Qala'at Ibn Ma'an)

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



Wallcreeper

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.

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