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Feature: Underground Tourism Israel's Cave Route

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Lower your head, bend your knees, turn on your flash-light and take a deep breath: You are about to descend into the entrance of Hezekiah's Tunnel, one of Israel's most interesting and historic caves—and also one of its scariest. This manmade, narrow waterway, built by King Hezekiah in 702 B.C.E. to divert the waters of Jerusalem's Gihon Spring and store it in the pools of Shiloah, is not for the overly tall, overly wide or even mildly claustrophobic. But as you plunk your feet into the knee-high cold water and fumble in the dark against the cool, wet stones, you can practically hear the ancient Israelites furiously hammering underground from both sides of the 1,750-foot-long passageway in hopes of preventing invading Assyrians from locating the city's water supply and cutting it off.

"When Hezekiah saw that Sennacherib had come and that he intended to make war on Jerusalem, he consulted with his officials and military staff about blocking off the water from the springs outside the city, and they helped him." So notes II Kings 32:1-4 about the alleged meeting of the two sides to carve the final aperture and let the water flow.

There are hundreds of caves in Israel, and for intrepid tourists—those who want to get wet, dirty or covered in "flour"—cave exploring is a great way to learn about the country off the beaten path.

Not all of Israel's caves are historic or man made. The Soreq Cave near Beit Shemesh, discovered in 1968 by a construction blast meant to produce a quarry but instead opened the entrance, appears so spectacular it almost seems like a movie set from *Indiana Jones*. But it's just an act of nature—over thousands or even millions of years in the making, depending on whom you ask. That is how long it took for rainwater to seep into the ground, dissolving the rock, creating caves and then releasing carbon dioxide to form stalactites and stalagmites and other rock formations.

At Soreq, long, spindly limestone columns emanate from the ground and ceiling in a vast 54,000-square-foot area, creating one of nature's finest museums. Colored lighting shows off formations that look like everything from elephant ears to a bride and groom to Moses climbing Mount Sinai. A thin stalactite and stalagmite that almost meet look like two of E.T.'s fingers, reaching out and touching; it is called "Romeo and Juliet."

A stunning cave setting is Rosh Hanikra (Head of the Grotto), a cliff along the Mediterranean coast on the northern border with Lebanon. Looking like a white elephant's trunk, the sea cave was opened in 1968 and is one of Israel's most popular tourist caves. It dates to 323 B.C.E. when, after his siege of Tyre, Alexander the Great dug a passage for his army; the tunnel was later used by the Crusaders. The history of Rosh Hanikra is less impressive than the actual experience: Standing there with the wind blowing in your hair, tasting the salty air, you might think you were in England or Wales—if the Lebanese border were not so close by.

Another great act of nature is the Beit Guvrin Flour Cave, located by Nahal Perazim, a gorge with a sand floor that leads you up to the cave. The cave is not really made of flour but a chalky, crumbly rock that will cover you like a baker when you emerge from the 10-minute excursion.

If you have a taste for the historical—and slightly creepy—visit Beit She'arim, sometimes called "The City of the Dead." Located east of Haifa, this underground necropolis was used by the Sanhedrin (the ancient Jewish supreme court of 71 elders) in the third century after Rabbi Judah Hanasi was buried here. Over the next two centuries, in the mishnaic and talmudic periods, other Jews wanted to be buried near him. (Last March, the Knesset chose the caves for their Jewish and natural significance to mark the beginning of the Love Nature, Water and the Environment Week.)




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Aside from the historical importance of the Sanhedrin, witness the stone entries that are carved as doors; the Greek inscriptions and drawings in the catacombs. There are more than 30 burial caves, some of which are open to the public; Rabbi Judah Hanasi's is by appointment only.

Many of Israel's most interesting caves, such as the Salt Cave at Mount Sodom in the Dead Sea region or the limestone caves on Mount Hermon in the north, are not open to the public, said Sergey Shipitsin, leader of International Cave Exploration Expeditions and of Sarma Israeli Extreme Sports and Rescue Association, which has 2,500 members.

"There's a serious problem with caving, cave researching and cave exploration in Israel," he complained, noting the tough restrictions on caving by the Israel Nature and National Parks Authority to protect the country's resources from thousands of tourists.

Who can blame them? Israel is a treasure chest for archaeologists, historians and explorers still making discoveries. Consider the Qumran Caves near the Dead Sea. In 1947, a Bedouin shepherd discovered them when he threw a rock into the cave to scare out one of his animals. It eventually led to the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, found in 11 different area caves and containing about 1,000 documents crucial to early Israelite history. (Only the archaeological site is open to tourists.)

Discoveries at Israel's caves abound. For example, the oldest known "glue" was found at the Nahal Hemar cave near the Dead Sea 10 years ago, dating back 8,200 years to the Stone Age. Made of collagen processed from animal skins, the finding shows the advanced technology of ancient people.

In 2006, a teenage spelunker's exploration of an untouched limestone cavern led to the discovery of eight new animal species.

Even though he wishes Israel's caves were more accessible, Shipitsin said the country is still a fantastic place for underground exploration.

"Really, there are hundreds of unknown caves in Israel," he said. "I promise that anyone can discover an unknown cave here and get a name for it."

Amy Klein is a freelance writer living in Los Angeles. Her graphic novel is at www.datingaddict.blogspot.com.

Caves in Israel

Beit Guvrin National Park

Near Kibbutz Beit Guvrin, 13 miles south of Beit Shemesh
011-972-8-681-1020; www.parks.org.il

Beit She'arim national Park

Lower Galilee, 12 miles southeast of Haifa
011-972-4-983-1643; www.parks.org.il

Hezekiah's Tunnel

Old City, Jerusalem; not recommended for young children and seniors
011-972-2-626-2341; www.cityofdavid.org.il

Rosh Hanikra

Four miles north of Nahariya on the Mediterranean coast; take cable-car ride down to grottoes
011-972-4-985-7108; www.rosh-hanikra.com

Soreq Cave

Between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, part of Avshalom Nature Reserve
011-972-2-991-1117; www.showcaves.com

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