Welcome to Bet Guvrin-Maresha National Park

Bet Guvrin-Maresha National Park is located in the heart of the Judean lowlands, a region of low hills, 250–350 m above sea level. The hills are covered with Mediterranean woodland mainly used for grazing, while the fertile soil that has collected in the valleys has been cultivated since ancient times.

Within the national park, which covers about 5,000 dunams (1,250 acres), is the biblical city of Maresha. During the Roman period Maresha was abandoned and the settlement moved to nearby Bet Guvrin. At that time, Bet Guvrin straddled an important junction on the road from Lod and Ashkelon to Hebron and Jerusalem.

The national park is famed for the numerous and fascinating caves dug by its ancient inhabitants. These caves served many purposes – as quarries, cisterns, storerooms, dovecotes, tombs, storage chambers for produce and shelters for farm animals.

Hewn caves are a common phenomenon in the lowlands because the rocks that make up the region are soft, light-colored chalk that is easy to quarry. In many places the chalk is covered with a harder crust, known as nari, some 1.5–3.0 m thick.

Touring Routes

Highlights (about 2.5 hours, by vehicle and on foot)

From parking lot A, walk to the agricultural complex and installations (1) and the Columbarium Cave (3). Then drive to parking lot B to visit the Maze Cave (Cave System 7). Drive on to parking lot C to visit the Sidonian Cave (8). From there, drive to parking lot D to visit the Bell Caves (11). Drive on to parking lot E and visit the Roman Amphitheater (12).

See It All (3–4 hours on foot)

From parking lot A, set out for a walking tour about 1.5 km long. Begin at the Columbarium Cave (3) and walk to the Sidonian Cave (8). From there, start back to your vehicle or continue another 2 km on foot to the Church of St. Anne (10) and the Bell Caves (11) and about another 1 km to the Roman Amphitheater (12).

Handicapped- and Stroller-Accessible Route

The accessible sites are: the agricultural installations complex (1), the visitor service center (near the Sidonian Caves), the Bell Caves (11) and the Roman Amphitheater (12).

Sites in the Park

★ Recommended

Parking Lot A

★ Agricultural installation complex (1)

Ancient equipment for processing agricultural products has been reconstructed here. The model olive oil press represents dozens of industrial installations to produce oil that operated in this region in antiquity. A typical olive press included a crushing stone and two or three beams to which weights were attached to press oil from the crushed olives. The beam was also called a “beit bad” (“beam house”).

Olive cultivation and oil production were very important to the ancient lowlands. Thousands of dunams of olive groves surrounded Bet Guvrin. The olives were harvested in the fall, which was “high season” for the oil presses, which worked continuously for about three months. One round of the initial olive-crushing took about 30 minutes, but pressing the oil took a few hours.

Olive oil had many uses in ancient times – as illumination, in cooking, as a foodstuff and to preserve food, in rituals, as body oil and a cosmetic. After the oil was pressed out, the waste was used as a fuel and as bonding material in construction.

Awinepress and threshing floor have also been reconstructed here. Wheat was separated from chaff using animal power at the threshing floor and grapes were trampled at the winery to produce juice that fermented into wine.

The “Polish Cave” (2)

This is a cistern hewn in the Hellenistic period. In the middle is a block of stone, part of a pillar that supported the ceiling. At some point, niches to raise doves were carved into the cistern walls. During World War II, Polish soldiers from General Władysław Anders’ army – which was loyal to the Polish government in exile in London – visited this cave. They carved the figure 1943 (the year of their visit) into the pillar, along with an inscription: “Warsaw, Poland” and an eagle, the symbol of the Polish army.

★ The Columbarium Cave (3)

A columbarium is an installation to raise doves. The word comes from the Latin colimbus, which means dovecote. The walls of this cave feature high-quality design and are carefully carved with over 2,000 niches.

The raising of doves was very common in the Judean lowlands during the Hellenistic period. Doves were apparently used intensively – their meat and eggs as food and their droppings as fertilizer. Doves were also sacrificed in rituals. After the raising of doves as a prosperous industry ceased in the 3rd century BCE, other purposes were found for this cave, like many others at Maresha. In Maresha alone, some 85 columbarium caves have been discovered, tens of thousands of niches.

The “Bathtub Cave” (4)

This is a small cave that was used as a sitz bath. The cave consists of a staircase and two small chambers, one of which was sunken. A seat was carved in the lower chamber. Water poured over the bather, who sat in the sunken room, through feeder channels and spouts hewn into the walls. The person pouring the water would have been unable to see the bather, thus preserving the bather’s modesty.

The bathtub was used during the Hellenistic period. This method of bathing may have conceived to ritual purification rites of the inhabitants of Maresha, who were of Slavonic origin. More than 20 rock-hewn installations that served as bathtubs have been found at Maresha.

The Oil Press Cave (5)

This is one of 22 underground oil presses discovered in Hellenistic Maresha. Most of them have one crushing installation, two or three feature press beams.

Parking Lot B

Tel Maresha

Tel Maresha rises to 357 m above sea level, with the upper city or acropolis, about 30 m above the lower city. The appearance of the steep, terraced-looking slopes of the upper city is due to the remains of walls that surrounded the city for 800 years, from the Israelite period to the end of the Hellenistic period (9th–1st centuries BCE). Square corner towers were integrated into the city wall, the remains of one of these can be seen in the northwestern corner of the tell. The top of the tell affords an impressive view of the national park and its surroundings.

Dwelling (the Villa) (6)

This house, which has been partially reconstructed, was used as a dwelling and for commerce in the Hellenistic period. The ground floor, with rooms arranged around a small central courtyard, extends over 350 sq m. A staircase led to a second story. The walls of the house were preserved to 1.5 m above the floor and were plastered to protect the soft chalk rock from weathering. The reconstruction team left some of the stones in the rebuilt wall exposed.

A hoard of 25 coins was found under the floor of one of the rooms. The latest coin was minted in 113 BCE, and the house was probably destroyed around that year, during the conquest of Maresha by John Hyrcanus I.

Cisterns found under the dwelling stored rainwater channeled from nearby alleyways, the roof and the courtyard. The water flowed to the cisterns by means of a clay pipe and channels. A rock-hewn staircase and bannister descends to the cistern. Beyond the broken wall of one of the cisterns is a large quarry with pillars supporting the ceiling. A passage now leads the quay to the cisterns of the neighboring house.

★ The Maze Cave (7)

The Maze Cave reveals dwellings and underground systems from the Hellenistic period. The houses are not currently open to visitors; archaeologists have covered them with soil until a way is found to display them without damaging them.

The staircase of the northern dwelling descends into the cave to a bathing chamber. From there, you can continue to the columbarium and to a large cistern. Passage continues to cisterns in which Hellenistic-period clay jugs, jars and bowls were discovered. In the last chamber, under the fourth house, is a reconstructed oil press. Unlike today, during the time of Hellenistic Maresha the walls of the underground room had no breaches and no passage linking them.

Parking Lot C

★ The Sidonian Caves (8, 9)

During the Hellenistic period the people of Maresha commonly buried their dead in caves with niches. Two of these caves are seen here. Many of the niches are decorated with gables (a triangular architectural element common on temple facades). In the Apollonophanes Cave (8), the

LEGEND:
Information and carpark
Trash
Well
Bicycle trail –
Direction of traffic
Burial Niche Cave
Well
Toilets
Snack bar
Souvenir shop
Parking
Picnic tables
Drinking water
Shade structure
Lookout
Handicapped accessible
Handicapped accessible path
Gas station
No entrance!
The History of Maresha

Maresha was fortified by King Rehoboam of Judah following the campaign to the region of the Egyptian Pharaoh Shishak. "And Rehoboam built cities for defense in Judah... and Mareshah... and Ziph" (2 Chron. 11:5–8). Shortly thereafter, in the early 9th century BCE, Shishak’s son sent an army to Judah under the command of his general Zerah the Ethiopian. However, King Asa of Judah defeated him near Maresha.

During the Persian period, after the destruction of the First Temple, Judeans who came from the Negev settled in southern Judah and the region became known as Iduma. In the 4th century BCE, Sidonians and Greeks joined them, bringing Hellenistic culture to the region. Hellenistic Maresha was a cosmopolitan center and an economic magnet and was also home to a few Egyptians and Jews. Some of the Jews were descendants of the local population from the time before the destruction of the First Temple and others came from coastal plain cities.

The Hellenistic period saw the construction of Lower Maresha, many caves were also heewn during this time. Historical sources and excavations reveal that in 133/12 BCE the Hasmonoan king John Hycanus conquered Iduma and forcibly converted its inhabitants. Hycanus also laid waste to the city.

Maresha was eventually reinvoked, but its glory days were past and it remained a small settlement. It was completely destroyed in 40 BCE in a military campaign by the Parthians, who controlled Western Asia beyond the Euphrates River and were the enemies of Rome.