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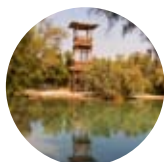
Qumran Park

(National Park)



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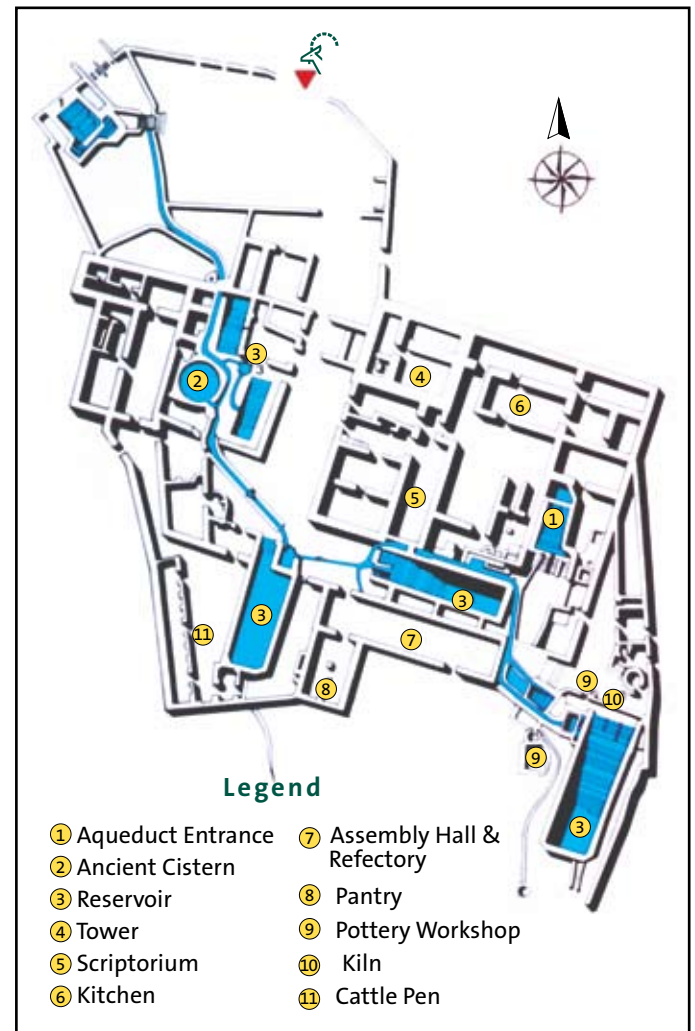
Welcome to Qumran National Park

Qumran, located west of the Kaliah-Sedom road on the north-western shore of the Dead Sea, had a Jewish population as far back as the eighth century B.C.E. But it was not this settlement that made the site famous. Qumran's fame comes from a break-away sect, known as the Essenes, who lived and studied here for two centuries – from the end of the Hashmonean period, through the great revolt of the Jews against the Romans – and left in the surrounding caves a magnificent legacy, that we now call the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The Essenes arrived at Qumran towards the end of the second century B.C.E., during the rule of either John Hyrcanus I or Alexander Yannai. In 31 B.C.E., during the reign of Herod, there was a serious earthquake in the area and the sect abandoned the site. But a quarter of a century later, during the rule of Archelaus, Herod's son (4 B.C.E. – 6 C.E.), the Essenes returned to Qumran and rebuilt it. In 68 C.E., during the great Jewish revolt, the Romans conquered Qumran and dispersed the sect. The last known inhabitants of Qumran were members of a Roman garrison stationed there during the Bar Kochba revolt (132-135 C.E.). When the garrison was relocated, the site was abandoned and forgotten.

The search for the center of Essene activity began in 1947, the year that Bedouins shepherds found seven ancient scrolls in a local cave. Father R. de Vaux and a team of French archaeologists excavated the area between 1951 and 1956 and found additional scrolls and early structures, that supported the theory that Qumran had indeed been the nucleus of Essene activity. The caves that dot the difficult-to-reach slopes and crevices of Qumran had served the Essenes in time of need as hiding places for their library. The scrolls, hidden in jars for nearly two thousand years and preserved as a result of the area's arid climate, included books of The Old Testament, the Apocrypha and the sect's own works. Some of these scrolls are on display at "The Shrine of the Book" in the Israel Museum.

The Essenes were ascetics, and as such, had paid great attention to ritual bathing and purity. They lived a communal life in a settlement that was constructed to make them as self-reliant as possible. They had assembly halls, a central dining room, in which ceremonial meals were eaten, a kitchen, ritual baths, a laundry room, a watch tower, a stable and a pottery workshop. Of special interest is the Scriptorium – the writing room – with its desks and inkstands, where the Essenes scribes probably wrote most of the



scrolls found in the adjoining caves. Members of the sect lived in huts and tents. The central cemetery of the sect was also located at Qumran.

After the Six Day War in 1967, Qumran was put in the care of the National Parks Authority, which built an access road and parking lot and installed sanitary facilities, paths for hikers and information signs.

Photography: I.N.P.A. archives

Production: Adi Greenbaum

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