

The promised land

With the future of Golan Heights tourism murky, now's the time to go

By Tina Traster



HERMON ON THE MOUNT
From the fields of the Golan Heights, snow-covered Mount Hermon is visible to the north.

On a sun-soaked May morning last spring, a piercing two-minute siren brought Israel to a halt, as it does every year on the nation's Remembrance Day. People everywhere stood in silence, heads bowed, to commemorate soldiers who have died for the country, including those who perished during Israel's capture of the Golan Heights from Syria in the Six Day War of 1967. It may be only a matter of time before a peace treaty returns the Golan Heights to Syria, and many say the stalled peace

talks are likely to resume when Syria's former president Hafez Assad, who died in June, is succeeded by his young, Western-educated son Bashar, who is believed more flexible than his father. If the Golan Heights revert to Syria, Israeli settlers will be forced to leave, and tourism in the region may become more restricted.

Often overlooked by American travelers to Israel, the Golan Heights, a 485-square-mile swath of chiseled mountains, broad, fertile valleys, fast-running rivers,

rich fauna and flora, and sites of historical and archaeological interest, is a three-hour drive north from Tel Aviv. The area is bordered by Syria to the north, Lebanon to the northwest, Jordan to the east and Israel's Sea of Galilee to the west. Since 1967, some 17,000 Jewish settlers have developed a thriving region of kibbutzim, vineyards, orchards, farms, a ski resort and the world-renowned Golan winery. Talk to them, and they'll share their worries about reverting to Syrian rule.

The region is no stranger to shifting foreign control. Local researchers have uncovered Canaanite idols, Hellenistic temples, Talmudic-era synagogues, Roman cities, Byzantine churches, Crusader and Mamluk castles, cannons from Napoleon's army and weapons from modern wars. During World War I, Britain conquered the Heights, then transferred the land to the French. When Syria gained its independence from France in 1945, the area was incorporated into the new Arab state. After Israel was established in 1948, Syria used the Heights as a launchpad for missile attacks into the Jewish state. Finally, in 1967, Israel took the Golan Heights, and Arab resi-

dents fled, except for a single Islamic sect called the Druse.

This political turmoil has unfolded in a landscape of stunning variety and beauty. Nature reserves teem with gazelle, wild boar, fox, vipers, agamas (which look like miniature iguanas) and waterfowl. Between April and October, wildflowers stud the hills and the riverbanks bristle with oleander, willow and flowering hemp. In the northern Heights, you'll find apple, pear, cherry and blueberry groves, while to the south, in the subtropical Hula Valley, farmers grow plums, apricots, nectarines, mangoes, avocados



TAKE ME TO YOUR LEADER The head of the Golan Heights' only remaining Syrian Muslim sect, the Druse, welcomes tourists to his village.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY TINA TRASTER

TRAVEL

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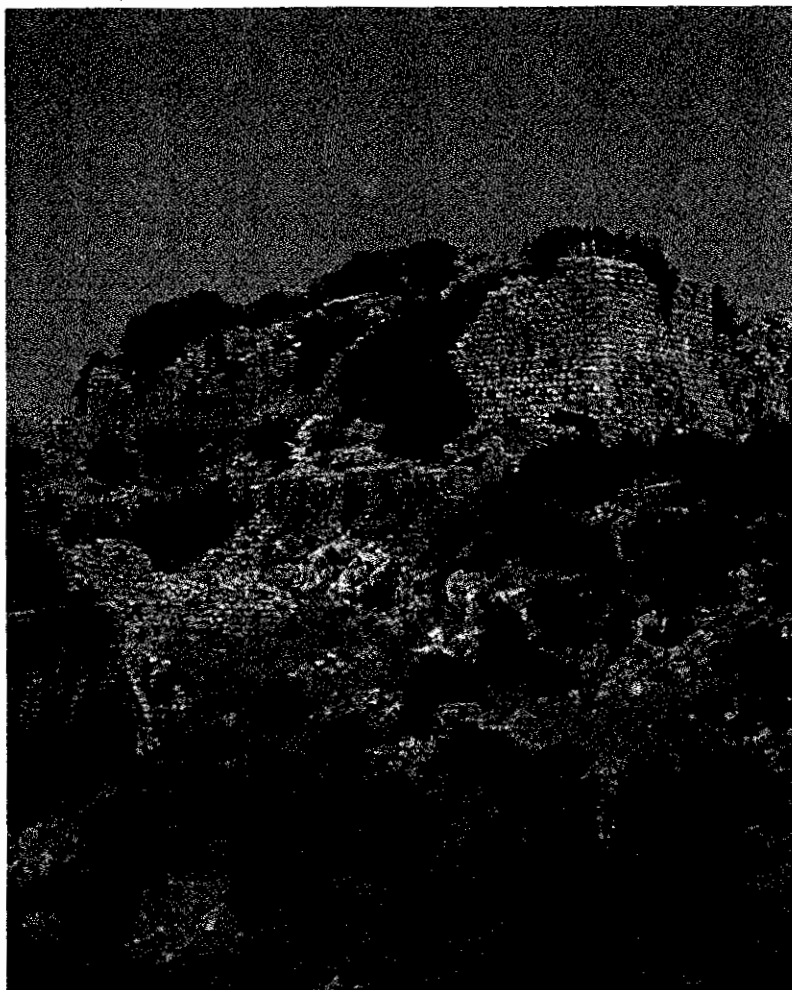
Time Out - Penguin

and bananas. To sample the natural bounty, visit the **Ein Zivan Kibbutz** plantation (Rte 91, 972-6-696-3537, June through September) near the Jordanian border, where for \$4 (at press time, one dollar equalled 4.09 Israeli new shekels) visitors can pick their own fresh fruits and herbs.

A good way to see the countryside is the three-day Golan Heights/Galilee hiking tour with the **Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel** (3 Hashfela St, Tel Aviv, 972-3-687-7695, www.SPNI.org; \$300 per person), a nonprofit education and environmental outreach group. It's wise for hikers to travel with a group, because parts of the countryside are still littered with mines, not to mention the stray military compound. However, many of the following destinations can be visited solo, and after my group tour, I spent two days traveling on my own by car (ELDAN, 972-6-690-3186; \$45 per day). The SPNI ecotour leaves Tuesdays at 8am from the organization's Tel Aviv office, and the package includes two nights at **Kfar Giladi** (Route 90, just north of Kiryat Shmona, 972-6-690-0000; also available to individual guests; call for rates), a

comfortable kibbutz guest house with stunning grounds and an indoor heated pool, located about two miles from the Lebanese border. (All of the locations listed below are easily accessible by car from Kfar Giladi.) In the evening, guests can help themselves to a hearty buffet in the communal dining room, consisting of typical Israeli fare such as salads, hummus and roasted meats. The food is basic but plentiful and delicious.

To the northeast of Kfar Giladi is the snow-crowned Mount Hermon range, which lies mostly in Syria and Lebanon. Mount Hermon itself towers 9,232 feet over the Golan plateau, or the Heights, an area sliced by deep canyons and dotted with clusters of oak and pistachio trees. The mountain, home to Israel's only ski resort, is easy to identify from every vantage point, thanks to a military base perched on the peak. *Sabras* (native Israelis) call the installation "the eyes of the country" because it keeps watch for signs of Syrian aggression. Nearby, eruptions from now-extinct volcanoes left basalt deposits along the canyon walls thousands of



CASTLE KEEP Scholars believe that Nimrod Castle was built in the Crusades era.

years ago; these rounded formations look as though they've been smoothed with giant buffers. A fine example of the canyons is found near Breihat Meshushim (the name means "hexagonal pool" in Hebrew), located along a hiking trail in the **Zavitan Nature Reserve** (on Rte 87, five miles southwest of Katzrin). After scrambling through the canyon, trekkers can take a chilling dip in the 50°F pool, tucked beneath a rushing waterfall.

Our SPNI tour group visited **Ein Kinya**, a Druse village. Our small party was invited to drink tea and eat *labne* (goat cheese) on pita and honey-oozing baklava with a Druse leader. He regaled us with lore, including tales about the sect's belief in reincarnation. Things grew a bit uncomfortable when one visitor asked how the Druse felt about the impending return of the Golan Heights to Syria. Obviously a keen student of politics, our host would not express any sentiment.

SPNI also took the group to **Gamla** (Rte 808, 972-6-696-3721; \$6), the ruins of an ancient Jewish settlement that fell to the Romans in the first century A.D. The site,

which hugs the spine of a camel-shaped mountain, was excavated just a year after the Six Day War by the late archaeologist Shmaryahu Gutman. Gamla's story resonates today among Golan's Jewish settlers because its residents refused to succumb to the Romans. During the Great Revolt (67-70 A.D.), the Romans slaughtered 4,000 of Gamla's Jews, and another 5,000 committed suicide, plunging from the sheer mountain peak. Today, near the collapsed eastern end of the town wall, you'll find reconstructions of Roman weapons, as well as piles of rounded stones hurled by catapults and arrowheads that were unearthed during the excavation. Inside the fortress are the remains of a synagogue and ritual baths.

After exploring the ruins, follow the red trail that leads to the 167-foot Gamla waterfall, Israel's highest cascade. From an observation deck, you can gaze at griffon vultures soaring over the ravine and nesting in the cliffs. Along the way, you'll notice dolmens—table-like constructions of giant stones, which may be prehistoric tombs.

Two other highlights in the region are the **Banias Nature Reserve** (Rte 99, 972-6-695-0272) and **Nimrod Castle National Park** (Rte 989 off Rte 99, 972-5-081-3227). Located near the source of the Hermon River, which flows from Mount Hermon down to the Jordan River, the Banias reserve holds ruins of an ancient temple built in honor of the Roman god Pan. The well-marked trails will take you to towers, walls, bridges, wells, flour mills and a small pita bakery of the Crusades era.

Nimrod Castle, an imposing citadel jutting from Mount Hermon that was named for the biblical hunter and warrior, is considered by some scholars to be a Crusader fortress, but others say Muslim Arabs built it. There are a few Crusader remains at the castle; most of the decorative aspects of the citadel originate from 12th-century Arab design. You can amble through the castle, noting an old cistern, some well-preserved halls, original staircases and outlooks that offer stunning panoramic views of the valley.

After spending three days and two nights in the middle and northern sections of the Golan Heights, I made my way south, staying at **Kfar Afik** (junction of Rtes 789 and 98, 972-6-676-4240), a kibbutz with modest but clean accommodations. From here, I drove along the western side of the Sea of Galilee, and eventually treated myself to an afternoon at **Hamat Gader** (Rte 90 in Tiberias, 972-6-665-9999; \$12), a Roman hot spring that has been turned into a medicinal mecca. You can soak in 102°F hot springs, plunge into cold pools, eat in any of the four restaurants or take a treatment at the spa for an additional cost.

Driving back to Tel Aviv, I wished I had more time to spend in this pastoral paradise. As a visitor, I'd understood that my time there would be limited, but for all the people who have been displaced or will be in the future, the thought of leaving this beautiful land forever must be wrenching indeed.

Getting there

At press time, a round-trip ticket to Tel Aviv from JFK on El Al cost \$1,144 through Expedia. ■