



A mosaic of the Virgin Mary and child from the Basilica of the Annunciation in Nazareth (see page 38)

Treasures of the Holy Land

In every era, emperors and kings have been allured by the Holy Land. This small strip of land has been conquered by the Babylonians, Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Crusaders, Ottomans and the British empire, to name but a few. Each conquest made its mark, leaving behind many historic sites of significance.

DAN SAVERY RAZ picks out ten of the most inspiring

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1 Avdat Negev

The home of the nomadic Nabataean tribe in the middle of the Negev desert

After Petra, Avdat was the second-most important stopping point on the network of lucrative spice and incense routes at one time spanning the Roman empire, the Middle East, north-east Africa and Asia. The Nabataeans, an Arab tribe who spoke Aramaic, the lingua franca of the time, built the city in the 3rd-century BC. Despite the harsh desert conditions, the Nabataeans developed a sophisticated system of irrigation here and even cultivated grapes for wine. Avdat, also known as Obodat and named after the

Nabataean monarch Obodos II, was annexed by the Romans for its trade potential and flourished in the Byzantine period until it was deserted after an earthquake in AD 630.

Probably the best-preserved Nabataean ruins in Israel (others include Mamshit and Shivta), Avdat boasts a Roman bathhouse, catacombs, several Byzantine churches and an ancient winepress, it was also the location for the filming of Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Jesus Christ Superstar* movie.

Avdat was the second-most important stopping point on the lucrative spice route between Rome and India

The impressive ruins of Avdat were declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 2005



2 The Basilica of the Annunciation Nazareth

Nazareth's most notable landmark is the largest church in the Middle East

The Basilica of the Annunciation looms large over the city of Nazareth in northern Israel. This vast hillside structure was built on what the Catholic Church believes to be Mary's childhood house, the location where she received the message she would give birth to Jesus. The original shrine, a small chapel built in a cave, was built in the mid-4th century. The Crusaders built a

larger church here, which was destroyed by the Mamluks in 1260 and the Franciscans later built a small structure to enclose the grotto. The current basilica was consecrated in 1969 and incorporates the earlier lower-level Byzantine-era grotto. Its dome is shaped to resemble a white lily and its courtyard walls display multicultural portrayals of Mary cradling Jesus. In



Greek Orthodox tradition, the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary while she was collecting water from a well and the Greek church is built at an alternate location on the other side of the city.

Saturday mass in the Basilica, as continues to be practised today

3 Caesarea northern Israel

Herod's hub by the sea was home to the Indianapolis of ancient Rome

Once a great port of the Mediterranean to rival Alexandria, Caesarea was the Roman capital of the Syria Palaestina province. Under King Herod's rule, a grandiose city was built for Augustus Caesar with a temple, palace, theater, amphitheater and markets. Completed after 12 years of back-breaking labor, Caesarea

opened for business (and pleasure) in 10 BC. Famous for its ancient hippodrome—the Indianapolis of its day—this was where chariot races and public tortures entertained up to 10,000 spectators. The city flourished in the Byzantine period, until it was mostly destroyed in AD 640 by the Arab conquest. In the 12th century, the

Crusaders took the city and discovered a green-glass chalice they mistakenly believed to be the Holy Grail, now kept in Genoa, Italy. Today, Caesarea is a national park with arches, pillars and mosaics surrounding the hippodrome, while the southern amphitheater has been restored and is now used for concerts.



The southern amphitheater at Caesarea still sees active service as the venue for numerous music concerts every year

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4 Church of the Holy Sepulchre Jerusalem

This is believed to be the location of Jesus's crucifixion and burial in Jerusalem

Out of all the churches in Jerusalem, and there's plenty of them, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre is considered the holiest. Hidden in a labyrinth of narrow alleyways in the old city, it houses the final five of the 14 Stations of the Cross, the series of images of Christ's crucifixion.

The Holy Sepulchre is one of three major churches founded by Helena,

the mother of Emperor Constantine, who traveled to the Holy Land some 300 years after the crucifixion; the other two churches are located in Bethlehem and Nazareth. Helena declared the site to be Calvary (derived from the Latin word for 'skull') when the grave of Joseph of Arimathea and three crosses were found during excavations.

The original church was completed in AD 335, though most of what stands today dates from the Crusader period church, restored in 1810. While not the prettiest church, it is one of the world's busiest, with thousands of tourists lighting candles near the rock tomb and regular processions held by Coptic, Greek Orthodox and Franciscan monks.

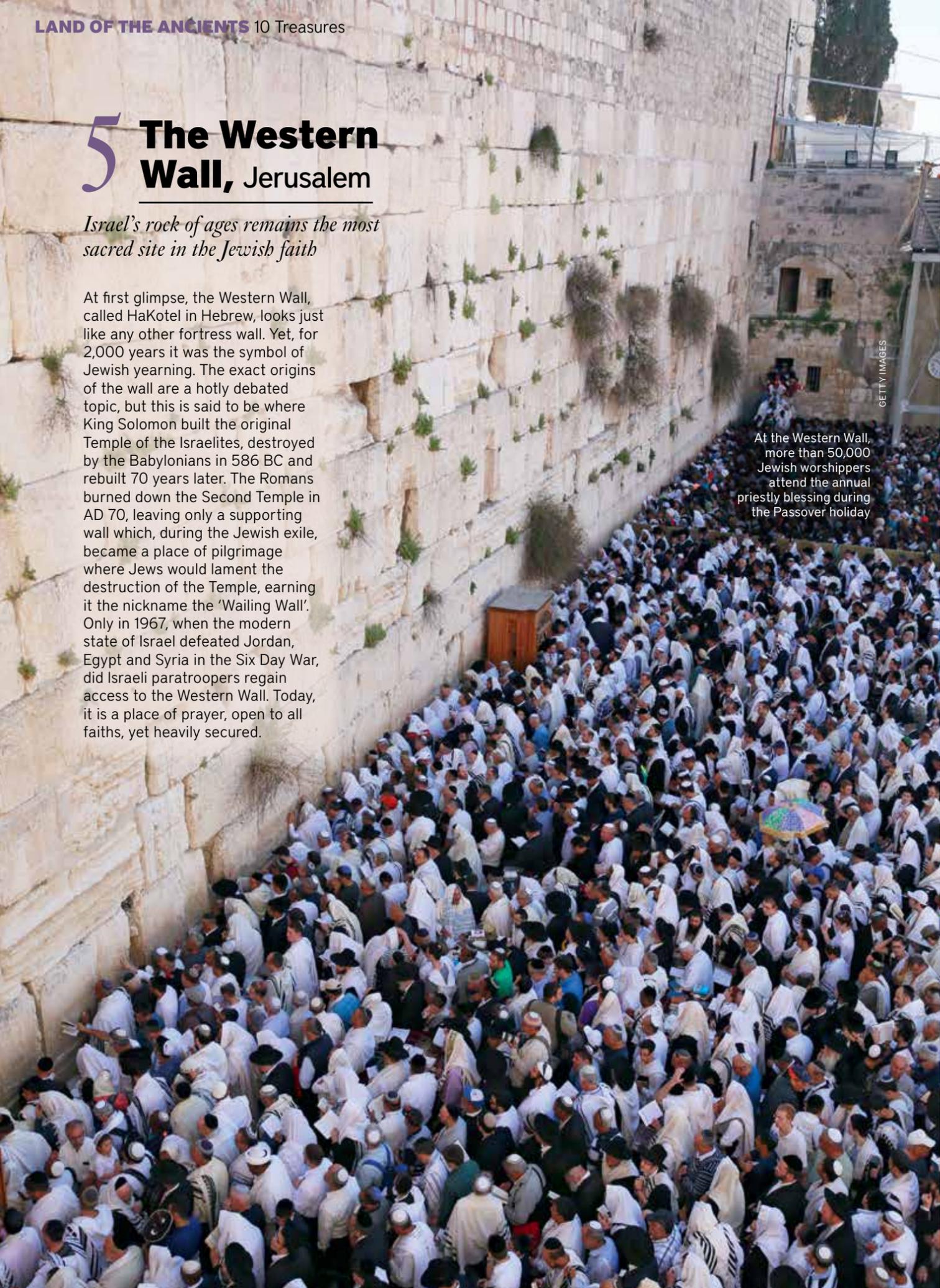
It may not be the prettiest church in the world, but the Holy Sepulchre is one of the busiest

A young boy is bathed in sunlight as he watches the Palm Sunday procession in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre

5 The Western Wall, Jerusalem

Israel's rock of ages remains the most sacred site in the Jewish faith

At first glimpse, the Western Wall, called HaKotel in Hebrew, looks just like any other fortress wall. Yet, for 2,000 years it was the symbol of Jewish yearning. The exact origins of the wall are a hotly debated topic, but this is said to be where King Solomon built the original Temple of the Israelites, destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BC and rebuilt 70 years later. The Romans burned down the Second Temple in AD 70, leaving only a supporting wall which, during the Jewish exile, became a place of pilgrimage where Jews would lament the destruction of the Temple, earning it the nickname the 'Wailing Wall'. Only in 1967, when the modern state of Israel defeated Jordan, Egypt and Syria in the Six Day War, did Israeli paratroopers regain access to the Western Wall. Today, it is a place of prayer, open to all faiths, yet heavily secured.



At the Western Wall, more than 50,000 Jewish worshippers attend the annual priestly blessing during the Passover holiday

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6 The Church of the Nativity Bethlehem

It feels like Christmas every day at Bethlehem's world-famous grotto

Whether or not this is the birthplace of Jesus, the Church of the Nativity is a remarkable heritage site. It's the oldest continuously operating church in the world, commissioned in AD 326 by Helena, Emperor Constantine's mother. Constantine famously converted to Christianity, thus changing the face of the Roman empire.

Like many other historic sites in this part of the world, it is a mish-mash of Byzantine, Crusader and modern architecture. Inside, it includes the

remains of Constantine's original 4th-century mosaic floor, along with red-and-white limestone columns dating from the 6th century, when Emperor Justinian rebuilt the church. Popular with tour groups, the Grotto of the Nativity has a 14-pointed silver star where Jesus was said to have been born. Although situated in the troubled West Bank region, the church is still a major place of pilgrimage for Christians and world leaders; Barack Obama made a whistle-stop here in 2013.



Franciscan priests pray before the Bethlehem Star at the Grotto at the Church of the Nativity

7 Old Jaffa near Tel Aviv

The Biblical port that's seen ships come and go for more than 4,000 years

Legend has it that Old Jaffa, called Joppa in the Bible, was founded and named after Japheth, son of Noah. Jaffa is mentioned in the Bible (2 Chronicles 2:16) as the place where cedar trees of Lebanon were imported to build Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem. The town was later conquered by the Assyrians, Persians and Hellenistic empires, although was neglected by the Romans who built a new port in Caesarea. Notable sights in Jaffa

include an underground Hellenistic-era excavation site, Simon the Tanner's House (where St Peter restored Tabitha to life in the New Testament) and St Peter's Monastery, a Franciscan church built in the 1890s on the ruins of the Crusader citadel.

In recent years, the port's empty shipping hangars (once home to Jaffa oranges) have been redeveloped as cafés, shops and art galleries, where Jews and Arabs exist peacefully together.



The narrow streets of Old Jaffa have experienced a colourful history

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The port is now a hub of cafés and shops where Jews and Arabs exist peacefully together



The Dome of the Rock is situated in a location in Jerusalem that's of deep significance to Jews and Muslims alike

8 Dome of the Rock Jerusalem

The golden shrine that shines all over the world

Aside from being one of the most photographed and eye-catching buildings on earth, the Dome of the Rock (Qubbet al-Sakhra in Arabic) is all about location. Built atop the Temple Mount, Jews believe this was the site where Abraham bound his son Isaac as a sacrifice to God, while Muslims claim this was the spot where the Prophet Muhammad ascended into heaven. Underneath the dome lies the rock which, according to the Quran, wanted to join Muhammad in heaven and rose from the ground.

The Dome was built between AD 688 and 691 under the rule of the caliph Abd al-Malik Ibn Marwan to compete with the Christian Church of

the Holy Sepulchre. The original golden dome was melted down to pay debts and King Hussein of Jordan donated the 1.3mm of gold that covers the entire roof today. Like Mecca, the Dome of the Rock is not a mosque but a shrine. Entry is only allowed for Muslims.

The building's original gold dome was melted down to pay off the debts of a past sultan

9 Masada southern Israel

Mystical mountain-top ruins overlooking the Dead Sea

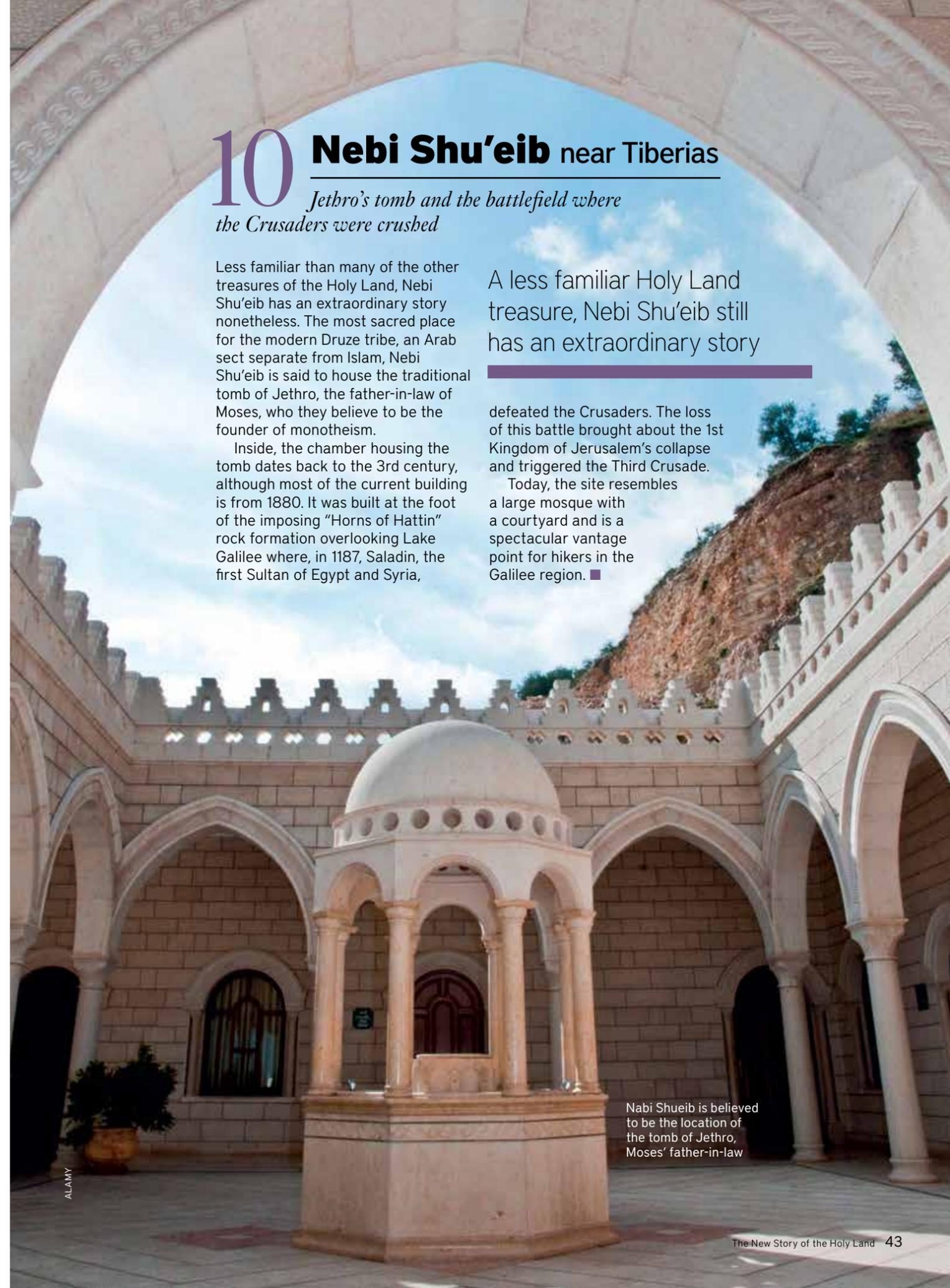
Many a tale has been told about Masada, a red-rock mountain in the Judean desert synonymous with perhaps the most famous mass suicide in history. Herod the Great built palaces on top of this isolated rocky plateau and fortified it around 31 BC. It was overcome by a group of Jewish zealots (known as sikrikim in Hebrew) in AD 66. In AD 73, after the Romans had destroyed most of Jerusalem, almost 1,000 sikrikim made their last stand at Masada.

Surrounded by the Roman empire's X Legion, they chose to die rather than become slaves. When the Romans reached the top of the mountain, they found everyone dead, except for two women and five children. Masada now has a museum exhibiting Roman artefacts and a laser-light show at night. Visitors can either climb the mountain at sunrise or choose to take the easier cable-car option.



The ancient fortifications of Masada remain one of Israel's most popular tourist destinations

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10 Nebi Shu'eib near Tiberias

Jethro's tomb and the battlefield where the Crusaders were crushed

Less familiar than many of the other treasures of the Holy Land, Nebi Shu'eib has an extraordinary story nonetheless. The most sacred place for the modern Druze tribe, an Arab sect separate from Islam, Nebi Shu'eib is said to house the traditional tomb of Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses, who they believe to be the founder of monotheism.

Inside, the chamber housing the tomb dates back to the 3rd century, although most of the current building is from 1880. It was built at the foot of the imposing "Horns of Hattin" rock formation overlooking Lake Galilee where, in 1187, Saladin, the first Sultan of Egypt and Syria,

A less familiar Holy Land treasure, Nebi Shu'eib still has an extraordinary story

defeated the Crusaders. The loss of this battle brought about the 1st Kingdom of Jerusalem's collapse and triggered the Third Crusade.

Today, the site resembles a large mosque with a courtyard and is a spectacular vantage point for hikers in the Galilee region. ■

Nabi Shueib is believed to be the location of the tomb of Jethro, Moses' father-in-law

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