

# The Upper Galilee & the Golan

הגליל העליון



## ההגולן הגליל האعلى والجولان

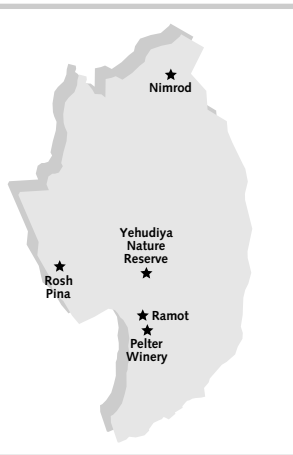
The greenest, lushest region of an otherwise rather dry rock, Upper Galilee and the mountainous Golan Heights are a hiker's dream, especially between February and May when its more than 30 national parks, filled with pools, rivers and waterfalls, are at their most dazzlingly emerald.

Nowadays the area is largely one of peaceful pastoral scenes and rolling vineyards, but Israel's fiercest battles took place in its silent, windswept highland fields. During the Six Day War of 1967, Israel captured the Golan Heights from Syria, and 90% of its inhabitants fled or were expelled. Then, in the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Syrian forces briefly invaded, before being pushed back to the current borders. Throughout northern Golan, you'll see evidence of these conflicts in the abandoned Syrian bunkers and tank remnants that coexist with the browsing cattle. Running between the Israeli and Syrian borders, and viewable from the Quneitra viewpoint, is a sliver of land known as the UNDOF (United Nations Disengagement Observer Force), or disengagement, zone. This neutral, unoccupied area is overseen by roughly 1000 UN troops. Whilst Syria maintains that peace won't happen before the area is returned to its control, the latter seems unlikely, partly because of the security implications for Israel, but not least because holidaying Israelis would be left with nowhere to escape the heat.

Although the border region is usually quiet and calm, tensions remain and a sudden outbreak of violence in July 2006, following the Hezbollah kidnap of two Israeli soldiers, stirred up turmoil again. Missiles rained down across the region and residents retreated to bomb shelters, unused in over a decade, as towns like Kiryat Shmona suffered widespread damage. The impact on tourism was immediate and devastating, though few believe it will have a lasting effect on what has become the country's prime, sensational weekend destination.

### HIGHLIGHTS

- Sipping wine at the **Pelter Winery** (p274) in Ramot
- **Horse riding** (p266) high up into them thar hills with a genuine Israeli cowboy
- Hiking the trails, canyons and waterfalls of the **Yehudiya Nature Reserve** (p267)
- Dining high up in the Golan at the fantastic, oddly named **Witch's Cauldron & the Milkman** (p271) in Nimrod
- Staying at a **luxury guesthouse** (p263), complete with spa treatments, log fire and gourmet cuisine



### Information

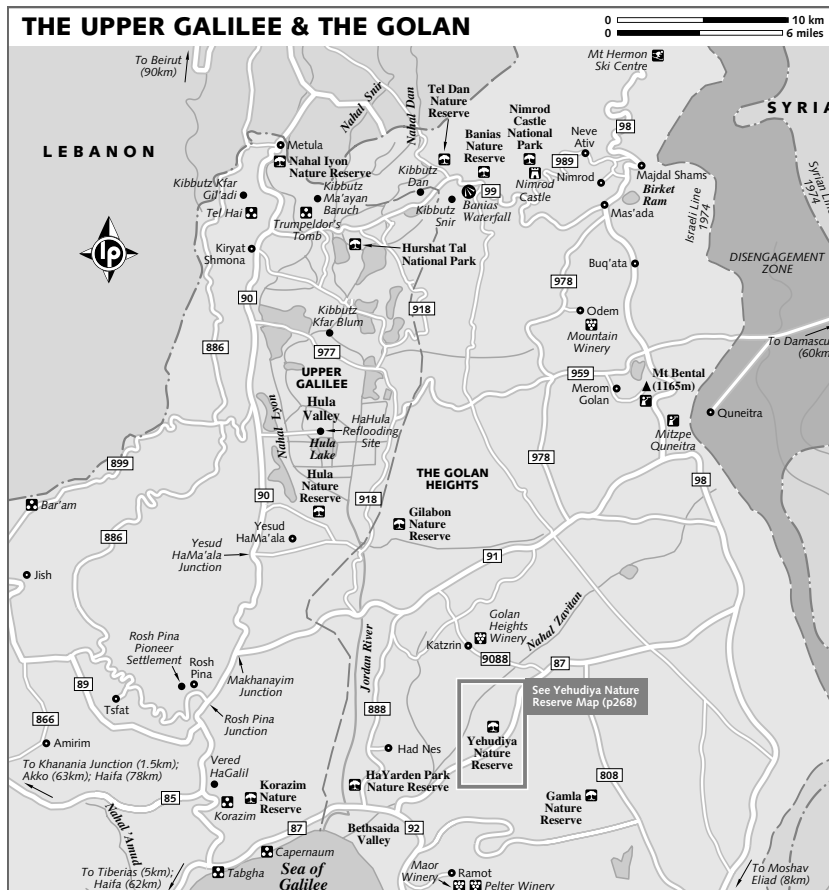
The **Upper Galilee Tourist Information Centre** (☎ 04-690 3737; Makhanayim Junction; ☎ 8am-4pm Sun-Sat) is 3km north of Rosh Pina.

### Accommodation

In the last few years, accommodation in the Upper Galilee and Golan region has become notoriously expensive, in line with its popularity as a weekend destination for well-heeled Israelis, and there are consequently few decent midrange places in existence. Many very simple outfits charge more than a good hotel in Tel Aviv, and prices skyrocket breathtakingly at weekends (Fridays and Saturdays) and during the summer, when a minimum

two-night stay may be insisted upon. All prices listed in this chapter refer to weekend rates (Friday and Saturday stays) in the high season, probably the steepest you'll encounter; off-season (between mid-November and March) you've got some scope for bargaining, especially for longer and midweek stays. Since places reinvent themselves fairly rapidly, go to [www.weekend.co.il](http://www.weekend.co.il) or [www.zimmer.co.il](http://www.zimmer.co.il) to check out the latest available options.

Because even youth hostels charge pretty steep prices in this region, it's best to consider camping if you're on a tight budget. The most appealing, and best-value, camping sites are situated on the eastern rim of the Sea of Galilee (p258).



## Parks & Reserves

The highlight of a trip to the Upper Galilee and the Golan Heights is a hike or two through one of its stunning national parks. Nearly all are maintained by the **Israel Nature & Parks Authority** (INPA; ☎ 06-680 0086/2006; www.parks.org.il) and have standard opening hours of 8am to 5pm April to September and 8am to 4pm October to March. Most also have standard entrance fees of 18NIS to 23NIS per adult, though some charge a few shekels extra for entry to visitors centres.

There are a couple of economical options if you're planning on visiting a few parks during your trip. A one-week card, which allows entry to six parks, costs 80NIS per person; a two-week card offering unlimited access to all parks is 120NIS. If you're planning a longer trip, or are part of a family travelling together, it makes more sense to opt for the year-long card, at 225NIS per person, 250NIS for a couple, or 335NIS for a family with children up to 18 years old. Cards can be purchased at any of the parks.

Generally, the parks suffer from a dearth of English-language literature covering in detail the numerous walks and hikes – from gentle forest strolls to abseiling down gorges – that can be undertaken. Basic maps, with a brief guide, are available at the entrance, but most books on walking in Israel are currently out of print. Perhaps the best thing to do is seek the advice of the park wardens who staff the ticket offices and information booths: they'll be able to tell you

exactly where to go and what to see, especially taking into account massive variations in terrain between wet and dry seasons.

## Getting There & Around

While **Egged buses** (☎ 03-694 8888; www.egged.co.il/eng) ply the routes between the main Galilean and Golani settlements, principally Katzrin, Rosh Pina and Kiryat Shmona, services are pretty thin on the ground, particularly at weekends. Call, or visit Egged's website to find out exactly when and where services run. There's also the option of taking an internal flight to Rosh Pina from Tel Aviv's Sde Dov airport; **Arkia Israeli Airlines** (☎ 800 444 888; www.arkia.com) plies the 30-minute route three times per day.

The single best option to explore the region, though, remains to rent a car in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem or Tiberias. Distances are relatively short, and the flexibility driving gives is unparalleled. Although not recommended, the local alternative is to hitchhike. Many Israelis, particularly teenagers, thumb their way around the region, and friendly locals are happy to oblige with rides.

## ROSH PINA רֹשׁ פִּינָה רוֹשׁ בֵּינָא

☎ 04 / pop 2594

Rosh Pina's rustic charms have in recent years been discovered by the holidaying Israeli masses, turning it into possibly the most expensive and well-developed luxury base for exploring the Upper Galilee and the Golan. Consequently, there is a whole

## THE UBIQUITOUS ZIMMER

It might come as a surprise to find that the most common form of accommodation throughout the Upper Galilee and the Golan is known as the *zimmer*. No-one really knows how it was that this particular German word came to symbolise, for Israelis, all that's idyllic about a cabin in the country, though some suggest it was originally an attempt to copy the 'Zimmer Frei' signs of Alpine guesthouses. But whatever the reason, cabin fever has taken Israel by storm, and this type of accommodation is by far the easiest to find.

*Zimmers* adhere to their own set of very specific criteria, most commonly consisting of a glorified wooden cabin with rustic varnished pine décor, satellite TV and a kitchen corner complete with tabletop stove and small fridge. Little treats usually await guests: a fruit bowl, home-made cookies, fresh flowers and sometimes a bottle of local wine, alongside teabags, coffee and a carton of milk. The cabins can be solo or form part of a massive, tightly packed complex; they may be set high on a hill side with a great view from the porch, or isolated in the middle of the woods. But their most oft-touted and highly prized feature of all is the Jacuzzi. Most have one; most Israelis won't book a *zimmer* without one. And whether or not you're a fan of this most '70s of luxuries, chances are you'll find yourself soaking in one with a sigh of 'Well, we *did* pay for it,' on almost any trip to the area.

## UNEXPLODED MINES & LIVE ROCKETS

Many areas of the Golan Heights, particularly the further north you go, are still quite literally minefields. These Syrian landmines date back from the '60s and '70s and have never been cleared, perhaps because Israel feels that in the event of another war they might actually work to its advantage. Every year, a few unwitting hikers wander off national park trails only to find themselves confronted by a 'Danger: Landmines' warning sign – on the opposite side of the fence. Although stranded hikers are usually airlifted to safety by army helicopters, it's best to stick closely to marked trails and keep a lookout for the characteristic barbed-wire fences surrounding potentially mined areas.

A second possible hazard to visitors stems from live Katyusha rockets, fired across the border from Lebanon by Hezbollah guerillas. You'll notice bomb shelters in towns like Metula and Kiryat Shmona, and along country roads the further north you go. Though missile fire has been quite rare over the last few years, the summer of 2006 saw a fierce return to violence, with rockets causing destruction to northern towns, and dozens of Israeli deaths. As with most things in this region, the situation can change daily, so keep abreast of current developments and be aware that, in case of missile fire, many northern roads may be closed, services closed, and bus and train lines suspended.

host of top-end accommodation and dining options that are worth every shekel. At the Galilee Mall, at the entrance to the town, there's a branch of the bookstore Steimatzky, a Bank Hapoalim ATM, the **Rosh Pina Tourism Association** (☎ 1 800 323 223, 04-680 1465; www.zhr.org.il in Hebrew; ☎ 8am-4pm Sun-Thu), and the usual assortment of generic shopping centre stores.

## Sights

Here's where the first Romanian inhabitants of Rosh Pina settled in 1882, building homes on either side of Rishonim St and together forming the very first Jewish settlement in the Galilee. The **Rosh Pina Pioneers Restoration Site** (☎ 693 6603/6913; audiovisual display 15NIS; ☎ 8.30am-5pm Sun-Thu, 8.30am-1pm Fri & Sat) is situated right at the top of town; to get there by car, drive up along the narrow HaHalutzim main street, then turn left on the steep cobbled road to the car park at the top. There's nothing specific to do at the site except wander past the pretty, restored stone houses, visit the **old synagogue** built by Baron Edmond Rothschild, and check out the **Shop Around the Corner** (☎ 693 0340; ☎ 10.30am-6pm Tue-Sat, 10.30am-3pm Sun-Mon), a craft shop that stocks a selection of killer home-made cinnamon and limoncello liqueurs. There's also a small audiovisual display next door to the Old Rosh Pina Post Office, illustrating the foundation of the settlement.

## Sleeping

**Villa Tehila** (☎ 693 5336; www.villa-tehila.co.il; 10 HaHalutzim St; d 650NIS; ☎ ☎) You're likely to

spot a few well-known Israeli faces dallying in the courtyard of this fabulous B&B in the centre of Rosh Pina. Its passageways brim with a gorgeous combination of bubbling fountains, glittering fairy lights, and cages filled with parrots and baby bunnies; its 11 rooms are all decked out exquisitely with antiques and plush fabrics, and it even has a small swimming pool. There's a two-night minimum stay at weekends. Book well ahead, as it's nearly always full.

**Auberge Shulamit** (☎ 693 1485/1494; www.shulamit.co.il; David Ashub St; d/ste with breakfast 680/800NIS; ☎) A pretty place with just three guest rooms and one suite with outdoor Jacuzzi; guests benefit from a 10% discount on meals in Shulamit's fantastic, elegant restaurant. The breakfast is lavish. There's a two-night minimum stay on weekends.

**Hotel Mizpe Hayamim** (☎ 699 4555, 1 800 555 666; www.mizpe-hayamim.com; s/d/ste 298/351/466NIS, with half-board; ☎ ☎) The place to be pampered, this plush spa hotel is set in 38 acres of verdant gardens and offers dozens of massages, facials and an intriguingly titled 'Love Therapy' treatment, as well as shiatsu, Reiki healing and reflexology. Its acclaimed Muscat Restaurant uses mostly organic, locally sourced ingredients, with scrumptious results – just as well, since rooms are only available on a half- or full-board basis. The minimum stay is two nights at weekends.

## Eating

For cheap eats, visit the Galilee Mall at the entrance to the town, where there are a couple of shwarma and felafel stands.

**Chocolata** (☎ 686 0219; Rosh Pina Pioneers Restoration Site; mains 25-60NIS; 🍴 lunch & dinner) Tucked away beside the synagogue, Chocolata is a cute place for a light lunch of pasta, salads or sandwiches, but the main reason to visit is to taste its house creations of chocolate soup and handmade pralines.

**Café Gitel** (☎ 693 0808; mains 35-55NIS; 🍴 8am-late) One of Rosh Pina's landmarks, on the main lower road next to the police station, Gitel was established in 1929 by Gitel Kleinstein, a Polish immigrant who ran the café every day until she died in 1983, at the age of 93. Now situated slap-bang next to a Paz petrol station and within sight of the motorway, it's nevertheless a nice place to stop for lunch. Historically, it was the highlight for travellers passing the region, though Gitel listened in on the conversations of lurching British Mandate soldiers, then relayed their plans to the Palmach, the predecessors of today's IDF. Mains are simple fare of toasts, sandwiches, salads and pizzas, but the cakes and coffees are delicious.

**Babait shel Rafa** (Rafa's House; ☎ 693 6192; Beit Professor Mor, Rosh Pina Pioneers Restoration Site; mains 50-100NIS; 🍴 12.30-11.30pm) A beautiful old stone house is the setting for imaginative takes on traditional Argentinean dishes. Try the sumptuous chorizo *asado* (grilled chorizo sausage) or the tasty *empanadas* (savoury stuffed pastries), washed down by local red wines.

## Drinking

**Blues Brothers Pub** (☎ 693 7788, 050 651 6357; 🍴 9pm-late Fri & Sat & summer months) Owned by the same people as Villa Tehila, it's an equally magical place to drink as the Villa is to stay, tucked away behind the B&B itself but linked by a stone passageway. With an enchanting garden, friendly staff and frequent live music, it's perfect to drink the night away beneath the stars. If you're peckish, try the onion soup, made to a 150-year-old recipe.

## Getting There & Away

Bus Nos 841, 842 and 845 make the journey between Tel Aviv and Rosh Pina, approximately two departing each way per hour (44NIS, 2½ hours). From Tiberias, a number of buses, including Nos 835, 840 and 836, depart in either direction about every half an hour (14.80NIS). The journey

takes roughly three hours, since buses stop at numerous small stops en route.

## HULA VALLEY & NATURE RESERVE

שמורת עמק החולה ואדי החולה  
Just 60 years ago, the Hula Valley was a vast, malarial swampland, stretching some 15,000 acres between the Golan and Lebanese mountains, and was a vital stopping-off point for tens of thousands of migratory birds on the wing between Africa and Europe.

But soon after the declaration of the State of Israel in 1948, the government decided to drain the marshes and ponds to make way for agricultural land, a task that began in earnest in 1951. It wasn't long until nature lovers and scientists across Israel engaged in a battle to conserve a portion of the original landscape, and in 1953 they formed the Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel (SPNI), which eventually won over 800 acres of the wetlands. This, the **Hula Nature Reserve** (☎ 04-693 7069; reserve admission 18NIS, visitors centre additional 15NIS; 🍴 9am-4pm), off Rte 90, became Israel's first reserve in 1964. Nevertheless, the damage had by then already been done, and several species of flora and fauna had disappeared.

The birds continue to flock to the site though, and today over 200 species of small waterfowl mingle happily with cormorants, herons, pelicans, raptors, storks and cranes, whilst water buffalo roam certain areas of the reserve, their grazing patterns helping to preserve the open meadows. The reserve's new visitors centre offers informative displays on the wildlife you might hope to spot during a visit, and the main 1.5km trail through its wetland habitat is wheelchair accessible and makes a nice gentle stroll.

Bus Nos 841 and 842 (twice per hour) between Rosh Pina and Kiryat Shmona pass at the turn-off to the reserve on Rte 90, around 2.5km from the visitors centre; ask your driver to let you know when you're there. From the turn-off it's an easy walk – or you can try hitching a ride from other visitors.

## Kiryat Shmona

קריית שמונה  
☎ 04 / pop 22105  
One of the largest towns in the Upper Galilee region, Kiryat Shmona is also one of the least visited by tourists, since there's little to detain a nonlocal. The town's name derives from the Hebrew phrase 'Town of the Eight',

referring to the eight Jewish settlers killed at nearby Tel Hai in 1920, including Zionist hero Josef Trumpeldor. Today, the town is probably best known within Israel for having frequently been a target of PLO and Hezbollah rocket strikes, which have killed a number of residents in recent years. Most recently, a renewed offensive between Israel and Hezbollah in July 2006 sent residents running into bomb shelters once more, as rockets rained down on the town's streets.

For queries, there's the **Kiryat Shmona Tourist Information Centre** (☎ 681 7152; 70 Tel Hai Blvd; 🍴 8am-5pm Sun-Thu, 8am-1pm Fri).

One of the main reasons to warrant a stop-off in Kiryat Shmona, the **Manara Cable Car** (☎ 690 4680; www.cliff.co.il in Hebrew; Kibbutz Manara; basic admission weekdays/weekends 49/59NIS, activities extra; 🍴 9.30am-5pm), 1km west of Kiryat Shmona on Rte 886/90, takes visitors up a steep hill side to a panoramic lookout over the Hula Valley. Adventurous souls can try out the climbing wall, abseiling and aerial runway, and there's an inflatable slide park at the top for kids, along with two gentle hiking options.

There aren't many worthwhile dining options in Kiryat Shmona, but the one exception is **Nechalim Gan** (☎ 690 4875; HaZafon Shopping Centre, Hurshat Tal Rd; mains 50-120NIS; 🍴 Sun-Fri noon-5pm & 6-11pm, Sat noon-11pm). It serves great food in a pleasant atmosphere. Sophisticated choices include great antipasti and succulent steaks.

The out-of-town Alonim Mall opposite Kibbutz Ma'ayan Baruch, just off Rte 99, has a number of cheap, basic eateries.

Kiryat Shmona is one of the north's major bus junctions, and services run from here to a number of places in the Upper Galilee and Golan Heights.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

The main buses, Nos 541, 841, and 963, run between Kiryat Shmona and Tiberias, stopping at Rosh Pina and the Hula Valley (26NIS, 1½ hours). Not all services are frequent, though, so it pays to consult the Egged website before setting off.

## Tel Hai

Just to the north of Kiryat Shmona, off Rte 90, the **Tel Hai Courtyard Museum** (☎ 04-695 1333; admission 16NIS; 🍴 8am-4pm Sun-Thu, 10am-3pm Fri, 8am-5pm daily Jul & Aug) offers an audiovisual display telling the story of Trumpeldor's last stand. Just up the road is the Military

Cemetery where **Trumpeldor's Tomb** lies, buried beneath a huge statue of the Lion of Judah, inscribed with his famous, and nowadays oft-repeated, words, 'It is good to die for our country.'

Situated next to Tel Hai Industrial Park, 2km north of Kiryat Shmona, and clearly signposted off to the right on Rte 90 to Metula, **HI – Tel Hai Youth Hostel** (☎ 04-694 0043; www.iyhha.org.il; dm/s/d US\$21.50/47.50/62; 🍴 📺) is one of Israel's best youth hostels, and a budget treat in a generally highly priced region. Set amongst green gardens, it's clean, spacious and lovely, with an amazing view of the Hula Valley and Golan Heights beyond. The hostel's facilities include a café, free internet in the lobby and a roofed sports hall and play yard for kids; there are six beds to a room in dorms. Booking is recommended in the summer and at weekends, since it's often packed.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

A great base if you have your own transport, bus Nos 20 and 23 also make the 10-minute trip from Kiryat Shmona, though it's not too far to walk if there's not one leaving for a while.

## HAD NES

حدنس ٥٦-٦٦  
☎ 04

Founded in 1986, this quiet, peaceful moshav welcomes visitors with a Yin and Yang sign and wind chimes at its entrance, a good indication of the slightly spiritual leanings of both its residents and paying guests. However, a barbed-wire fence running around the moshav's perimeter does rather disconcertingly disrupt its otherwise great views down to the Sea of Galilee.

While Had Nes doesn't have the laid-back charm of Ramot or the facilities of Rosh Pina, it's a decent base if you have a car, without which it's hard to get here. With most of its accommodation tightly packed along the lower road to the right as you enter the moshav, it's as if the village got a bulk discount from a travelling wooden-hut salesman. By and large there's little to choose from between the roughly 100 family-run *zimmer* operations with names like 'Air and Atmosphere', 'Enchanting Paradise' and 'Spring at Heart'. And if you've never seen a wooden hut with a bay window and garden gnomes before, this is definitely the place to come.

**Horse riding** (☎ 052 373 6735) is available on the road to the left of the moshav entrance (call Dudi for bookings); you won't miss the corral filled with plump, healthy steeds. There are also a number of jeep-tour operators, 4WD hires and all-terrain vehicle hire outlets in the moshav; since they change quite frequently, ask your *zimmer* owner for the latest recommendations.

One of the best accommodation options of the bunch, **Woodstone** (☎ 052 420 0567; www.woodstone.co.il; ste 750NIS, with breakfast) has high-end rooms, with Jacuzzi and all the usual trimmings, in a nice stone house with good views out over the Sea of Galilee. Two-night minimum stay for weekends.

Forego the two regular wooden cabins at **Cabins in Had Nes** (☎ 692 3419, www.had-nes.co.il; cabins 700-800NIS, with breakfast; ♿ ♿) in favour of its two bizarre cave-like ones. Reminiscent of sleeping in a *Flintstones* film set, it has its own, specific novelty appeal, and certainly makes a change from varnished pine. There's a tiny swimming pool out at the back, and all cabins have Jacuzzis. There's a two-night minimum stay at weekends.

## HAYARDEN PARK NATURE RESERVE

פארק היירדן מנתزه נהר הארדן

A verdant wooded area of greenery and water owned by the Forestry Commission rather than the INPA, **HaYarden Park Nature Reserve** (Jordan River Park; ☎ 04-692 3422; www.yarden.golan.org.il; admission 50NIS per car; ☎ 9am-5pm Sun-Fri) makes a nice place for a gentle afternoon walk. There are several hikes, to the site of an ancient flour mill – one of at least 12 ancient mills in the park – and to Bethsaida, where it is believed the three most important of Jesus' apostles were born and where Jesus is said to have performed several miracles, including the feeding of the five thousand. American scholar Edward Robinson rediscovered the remains of Bethsaida in 1838, though his findings weren't confirmed until over a century later in 1987. There's also a decent **camp site** (per night per carload of people 65NIS).

Situated inside the park itself, **Abu Kayak** (☎ 04-692 2245/1078; ☎ 9am-5pm Mar-Nov) offers one-hour trips down the river in inflatable kayaks or inner tubes. This is a gentle way to spend an afternoon – great for older children – gliding past the wildlife to a stop-off point from which you'll be bussed back to the park.

For more excitement, head further north instead to **Jordan River Rafting** (☎ 04-693 4622; www.rafting.co.il in Hebrew; aerial runway 35NIS, boat/kayak 69NIS, whitewater rafting 320NIS). Situated in a nice wooded park near Gadot Junction on Rte 918, this rafting outfit is one of the largest in the region and offers a variety of activity options including boating, kayaking, whitewater rafting and a whiz down its aerial runway. The minimum age for all its activities is five.

Next door is **Iscander** (☎ 04-693 5544; mains 70NIS; ☎ lunch & dinner), a great place to fill up after a day messing about on the river. Specialities include Turkish-style *lavash* bread, with a huge array of dips and salads and trout 'Mt Taurus' style, filled with garlic and bay leaves and wrapped in vine leaves. Take a table on the relaxing terrace at the back.

## RAMOT רמות رموت 04

A laid-back, leafy moshav strung along one hill-side road high above the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee, Ramot is chock-full of accommodation options, and offers the usual gamut of outdoor activities for which the Golan is becoming well known, including probably the best place in the country to swap two legs for four. But whilst this all makes it a great base, it's yet another destination, so common in the region, where prices are consistently high. Ramot also has a couple of good family-owned wineries, Pelter and Maor, both of which are happy to receive visitors (p274).

## Activities

There's nothing much to do here except lounge in the hammock on your cabin porch or take an easy downhill stroll to the Sea of Galilee, though if you need to get your adrenaline pumping there are a number of scramble-bike, mountain-bike and 4WD-hire outlets dotted throughout the settlement.

Most notably, however, the **Ramot Rodeo Ranch** (☎ 057 736 4750/1/2; 1hr trail ride 110NIS; ☎ 10am-5pm, closes earlier in winter) offers an outstanding location for horse riding, perched right on the ridge of a steep hill with incredible, sweeping views out over the vast expanse of lake. Its friendly Israeli-British owners are happy to cater to almost every equestrian whim you can throw at them:

in the past, they've arranged romantic candlelit dinners halfway along the riding trail, organised cowboy adventures for groups of 20, and sent riders packing on trips ranging from an hour to several weeks. You're also welcome just to drop in to admire the stunning sunset, and say hello to the horses and dozens of cavorting kittens. If you're without your own transport, call in advance to coordinate a lift up the hill, to avoid the gruelling hike.

## Sleeping

**Ramot Resort Hotel** (☎ 673 2636; www.ramot-nofesh.co.il; r & bungalows 640-700NIS, wooden cabins 800-880NIS, deluxe cabins 1500NIS; ♿ ♿) This large, slightly '70s place, just at the entrance to the moshav, offers none of the appealing intimacy of Ramot's family-run options, but the benefit of a large outdoor swimming pool, kids' pool and gym, as well as a range of accommodation options, comprising 80 hotel rooms and bungalows, 12 extremely swish deluxe chalets and 17 basic wooden cabins, suitable for families travelling with children.

**Briza Ba Kfar** (☎ 673 3204; www.briza10.com; cabin/ste 650NIS/750NIS; ♿) Twelve neat wooden cabins and four suites with spa facilities, tucked away on the right about halfway up the hill. The outfit boasts a bright and airy café, with a nice outdoor dining area, open daily for light meals from 8am to 6.30pm. A spa package, which includes a one-hour specialist treatment and the use of a sauna and Jacuzzi, is available for 220NIS.

**Oncen** (☎ 679 5522; www.oncen.com; d cabin 800-1000NIS; ♿) Stay in superb Zen luxury at this unusual pair of Japanese-styled *zimmers*, where your Israeli breakfast is incongruously served on Japanese tableware and each cabin comes equipped with a creatively titled 'Japanese Hot Springs' – which looks suspiciously like a glorified Jacuzzi.

## Eating

**Farm in the Village** (☎ 679 3275, 679 7097; dishes 60-80NIS; ☎ 6-11pm Mon-Fri, 1-10pm Sat) A fabulous place for a hearty dinner, situated on the left side not far from the entrance to the moshav. Its skyscraping salads, vegetarian stews served in miniature cauldrons and unusual combos such as spare ribs with hibiscus sauce are complemented by great views down to the Sea of Galilee.

## Getting There & Away

Egged bus No 15 from Tiberias to Katzrin stops at the junction below Ramot around twice per day in each direction (14.80NIS, 35 minutes); bus No 843 from Tel Aviv to Katzrin stops once per day in each direction (49NIS, three hours 20 minutes). Otherwise, without your own car, you're pretty much stuck with hitchhiking.

## YEHUDIYA NATURE RESERVE

שמורת יהודייה מנתזה יהודייה

One of the most popular reserves in the whole of northern Israel, Yehudiya offers a wide range of fantastic walks, catering to everyone from the casual stroller to the most experienced hiker. It's particularly notable for its whole host of sparkingly clear natural pools, most of which are OK to swim in, at your own risk. The rangers at the information booth at Yehudiya car park are extremely knowledgeable and will be able to point you in the right direction, as well as register you, for your own safety, if you're setting out on one of the more dangerous routes. Remember to check back in with them when you return.

Two of the most popular trails are listed below, though there are many others, some even necessitating professional climbing equipment. The Parks Authority recommends taking the SNPI trail map *Hermon, the Golan and the Galilee Panhandle* along on longer walks, though it's only available in Hebrew. Stick closely to marked trails, since there are a few military firing zones in the southern areas of the park, and also because people have fallen to their deaths whilst attempting to negotiate steep and treacherous makeshift trails.

The reserve houses the pleasant, functional **Yehudiya camp site** (per person 14NIS). There are barbecue areas and showers, though they're cold-water only and therefore pretty bracing. The camping area is open year round, is securely fenced and well lit at night, and there's man-made shade to camp beneath during the hotter months. Overall it's a great, well-organised camping option.

For a quick bite, there's also a café at the Yehudiya car park, which provides a surprisingly wide selection of hearty snacks, including *shakshuka* (fried eggs in spicy tomato sauce), shwarma and felafel, to hungry hikers.

### Upper Zavitan Canyon Trail

This is a medium-level hike, which should take around three or four hours, depending on the weather and how often you stop to admire the views.

Start from the Yehudiya car park, and walk north up the semi-paved road leading to a second car park, at the edge of the deserted Arab village of **Sheikh Hussein**. From here, follow the blue-marked trail, walking west past the remains of the village. After around 1km, turn north (right) onto an unpaved road marked as a black trail, which eventually crosses the Zavitan stream. Just after crossing the stream, turn left downstream, following the stream as it widens out into the Black Gorge, where

you'll find the weirdly beautiful basalt **hexagon pools**, formed by the slow cooling of lava around three million years ago. Further on, you'll reach the lookout point for the 27m-high **Zavitan waterfall**, spectacular after a rainy winter.

You can then decide to lengthen your walk by turning right down the often slippery blue trail to the pool at the foot of the Zavitan waterfall, or turn left down the blue trail, which heads back towards the Sheikh Hussein car park, from which you can retrace your steps back to the Yehudiya car park.

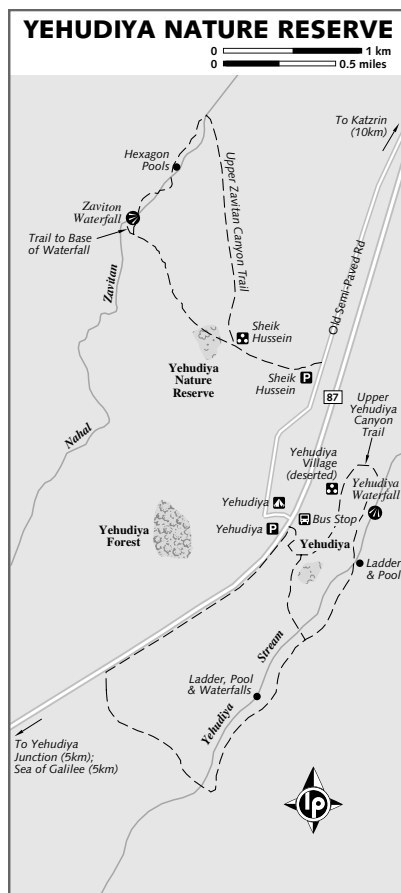
### Upper Yehudiya Canyon Trail

This, the most popular walk in the park, is a more challenging trail designed for competent hikers and swimmers, and definitely not for those with vertigo. It should take about four hours, and don't take anything nonwaterproof along since it's bound to get wet.

Starting at the Yehudiya car park, take the red-marked trail across the main road and left, past the deserted former Syrian village of Yehudiya, which itself was built on the remains of an ancient Jewish settlement. Continue along the red trail, looping round across the Yehudiya stream, where you'll have an excellent view of the canyon bed below. Descend down a steep and precarious path to the base of the **Yehudiya waterfall** then continue downstream along the canyon base. Slightly further on, you'll reach a 9m-high iron ladder set into the canyon wall, which you'll have to descend, then swim about 30m across a deep pool. Further on, you'll reach a split in the trail. You can either turn right on the green-marked route to ascend back to the main road and car park, or, to make it a longer walk, continue, navigating a second ladder and pool, before turning right on the red trail, which eventually cuts through woodland and emerges onto the main road. It's then a 1.6km walk north back to the Yehudiya car park.

### Getting There & Away

Egged bus No 15 passes the Yehudiya stop on its trip between Tiberias and Katzrin, twice per day in each direction; bus No 843 from Tel Aviv passes once a day (49NIS, three hours 20 minutes).



### METULA

☎ 04

מטולה מטולה

Metula, established by the Rothschild family at the end of the 19th century, is a cute, manicured small town, high up on the very edge of the Lebanese border and clinging to Israel by the skin of its teeth. It's Israel's northernmost settlement and has been a popular vacation spot, well away from the heat of the plains, since the early 20th century, when its snappy catchphrase was, 'Come to Metula – Escape the Malaria and Revive Yourself'. The tourist pull seemed to work, and famous figures including Bialik and Sokolov once holidayed here, alongside British Mandate dignitaries.

After WWI, Metula was situated in an area under French control, but under Zionist pressure the French ceded the settlement to the British. In 1926 the 'Good Neighbour' agreement was signed between France and Britain, allowing Metula's farmers to cross the border with 'transit documents' to farm their fields that lay on the opposite side. After the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, however, the fields of Metula once again came under Lebanese control, where they remain, uncultivated, today.

In the 1980s Metula was heaving with UN soldiers and journalists on their way through the Good Fence border crossing to Lebanon. Opened in 1976, the Good Fence also served legions of Lebanese hotel workers who worked in Metula, and southern Lebanese citizens seeking medical assistance in Israeli hospitals. Since 2000, when Israel withdrew its troops from southern Lebanon, the gate has been closed, and road signs to the site remain a sad reminder of how far things have come since the days of peace. Since then its character has totally changed. Nowadays, it's a sleepy, high-end weekend destination for holidaying Israelis, and the prices of its accommodation and dining options reflect its popularity. Most hotels and restaurants crowd around the semirenovated main HaRishonim St, at the top of the town. Here, many of the stone buildings have a significant historical past, recorded on the informative English-language information boards mounted on a number of them.

### Sights & Activities

The **Canada Centre** (☎ 695 0370/1; www.canada-centre.co.il; ☎ 10am-8pm Mon-Sat; ☎ ice skating 10am-

4pm, Sun by appointment only), a large sports complex housing Israel's largest ice rink and home to the Israeli national ice hockey team, is the main attraction for Israelis coming to Metula. There's also a big indoor pool with water slides, a shooting range, squash courts, a 10-lane bowling alley, saunas and a fitness centre.

On the main street in Metula, opposite the Beit Shalom guesthouse, you'll find a weekend **farmers' market** (☎ 050 388 6603) selling locally made produce, ceramics and handicrafts in a relaxed garden.

### Sleeping

**Beit Shalom** (☎ 694 0767; www.beitshalom.co.il; 28 HaRishonim St; standard/luxury ste 550/650NIS; ☎ ☎) Though the sign announces 'Luxury Suits', it's the well-equipped and spacious suites at this central place that are worth trying for size. Built in two late-19th-century stone houses, the rooms are surrounded by cherry orchards in amongst which guests can dine. Breakfast is the highlight of the day here, with 10 kinds of cheese, bread and jam, all home-made, and eggs from its own chickens. There's free internet in the lobby, a large outdoor Jacuzzi, and holistic massage available by appointment.

**Mool ha Beaufort** (☎ 054 541 1413; www.mula-bo-4.co.il; 22 Hanarkis St; r 800NIS, with breakfast; ☎) A pretty B&B with three serene two-room units and great views of Beaufort, a ruined crusader fort, across the border in Lebanon. The friendly owners can offer a wealth of knowledge on local hikes and attractions.

### Eating

**Bat Ha'Eykar** (Farmer's Daughter; ☎ 699 7177; 21 HaRishonim St; mains 60NIS; ☎ 10am-midnight) Housed in an old stone building with a large terrace out front, this makes a great place for simple country-style dining; try the mushrooms in honey and soy sauce or the locally caught grilled trout. With live jazz on summer evenings, when it stays open until the last guests leave, it's also good for a late-night drink or two.

### Drinking

**Griffin Irish Pub** (HaRishonim St; ☎ 10pm-late Wed-Sat) Tucked away in an old building about halfway along HaRishonim St, on the left side as you come into town, this cozy pub

offers the closest pint of real Guinness to the Lebanese border.

### Getting There & Away

To get easily to and from Metula, you'll really need a car.

### HURSHAT TAL NATIONAL PARK

פארק לאומי הורשת טל מנתרז גאבז טל  
Northeast of Kiryat Shmona on Rte 99, **Hurshat Tal** (☎ 04-694 2440/2360; admission 33NIS, free if staying at the camp site), meaning 'forest of dew', is especially popular because of its open-air pools that fill naturally with chilly water from the Dan River; the pools are packed with swimmers at weekends. The park is also well known for its 240 massive, ancient Mt Tabor oak trees, which, legend has it, sprung up overnight after 10 of the Prophet Mohammed's messengers rested here.

Hurshat Tal has a vast, grassy **camp site** (☎ 04-694 2360; camping 50NIS, bungalow 300NIS, wooden hut 700NIS), one of the nicest in the region. As well as spacious pitches, picnic tables and hot-water showers for campers, it also has a variety of other accommodation options, including wooden huts sleeping seven, and 50 bungalow units (each for four people).

Along with Tel Dan Nature Reserve, Banias Nature Reserve and Nimrod Castle, it's not too easy or convenient to try to get to the site by public transport, particularly at weekends; if you're determined, consult Egged for precise times and bus lines.

### TEL DAN NATURE RESERVE

שמורת טל-דן מנתרז טל דן  
A small reserve covering only 120 acres, **Tel Dan Nature Reserve** (☎ 04-695 1579; admission 23NIS; ☎ 8am-5pm Sat-Thu, 8am-4pm Fri), north of Rte 99, is a beautifully lush, forested area containing a number of small, bubbling springs that feed into the Dan River, which in turn flows into the Jordan. Within the park is a surprisingly varied selection of flora and fauna, including the Indian crested porcupine. There's also the remains of a grand biblical-era city, in which was found a fragment of tablet from the 9th-century BC, illustrating the victory of Hazael, King of Damascus, over the king of Israel and the king of the House of David. This is a significant find, since it's the first time a reference to the House of David has been found outside the Bible itself.

The reserve has four easy marked trails, one of which is partially wheelchair accessible. All of them pass by the shallow natural wading pool, good for cooling off amongst the greenery on a hot day. It is, however, a tricky place to reach without a car, unless you're hitchhiking.

Note that last entry into the reserve is one hour before closing.

Close to the entrance of the Tel Dan reserve, you'll find **Beit Ussishkin** (☎ 04-694 1704; admission 18NIS; ☎ 8am-4.30pm Sun-Thu, 8am-3pm Fri, 9.30am-4.30pm Sat), an archaeological and nature museum with interesting displays on the history of the Hula Valley.

### BANIAS NATURE RESERVE

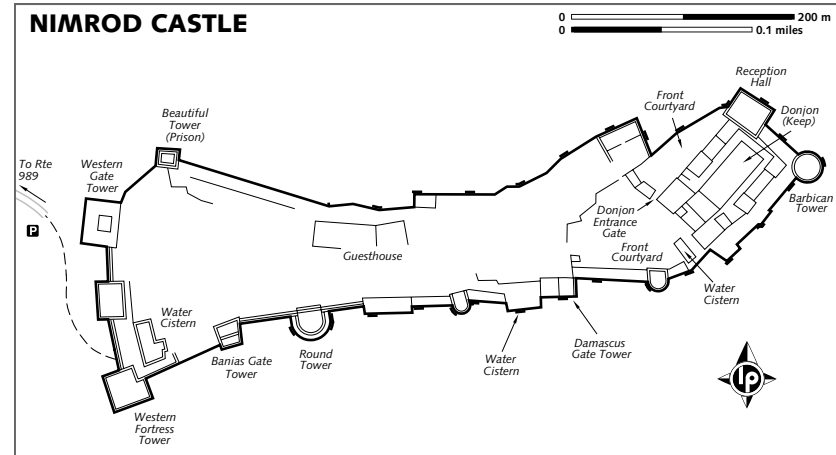
שמורת הבניאס מנתרז בניאס  
Off Rte 99, this is without doubt one of the most beautiful – and popular – spots in the whole of Israel. The gushing springs, waterfalls and streams of **Banias Nature Reserve** (☎ 04-695 0272; admission 23NIS, combined entry with Nimrod Castle 31NIS; ☎ 8am-5pm Sat-Thu, 8am-4pm Fri) are worth visiting all year round, though they're particularly beautiful in early spring, following snowmelt from Mt Hermon.

There are two entrances on the road to the site, one marked 'Banias Waterfall' and the other 1km further east, on the opposite side of the road. The Banias Waterfall is 33m high, thundering down to a deep pool at the base; tempting as it may look, swimming is prohibited. From the second entrance, there are a number of trails leading to the gurgling **Banias Spring** and the impressive excavated site of a **palace complex**, built by Herod's grandson, Agrippa II. The name Banias derives from Pan, god of the countryside, to whom the area was dedicated. Evidence of this can be seen in a cave inscription at the site.

In summer, the car park of the Banias Waterfall and the road outside the second entrance are lined with Druze villagers hawking nectarines, cherries and apples straight off the tree, as well as honey and olive oil. In winter the menu changes to *sahleb* (a sweet milky drink), chestnuts, and Druze pita with *labane* (soft, sourish white cheese), good to fill up on after a long walk.

### NIMROD CASTLE

מבצר נמרוד قلعة نمروت  
Towering, fairy-tale-like, on a ridge high above Rte 989 as it winds its way slowly



upwards towards Mt Hermon, the origins of **Nimrod Castle** (☎ 04-694 9277; admission 18NIS; ☎ Sat-Thu 8am-5pm, Fri 8am-4pm), are somewhat in dispute. Some believe the fortress was built in 1129 by Reiner Brus to guard the city of Banias from attack from Damascus. Others say it had its origins later, in around 1218, when Al-Malik al-Aziz Othman decided to build a fortress to protect the crucial route between Damascus and the Mediterranean coast from the sixth Crusade. Repeatedly captured, abandoned and reinhabited throughout the centuries, frequently changing hands between Christian and Muslim forces, it was finally ruined by an earthquake in the 18th century. Its modern name derives from the biblical figure Nimrod, who was said to have once inhabited the summit of the ridge.

Today, it's a magical place to wander, commanding great views from its narrow windows. After touring the remains, make your way up to the tiny moshav of Nimrod, off Rte 98, for lunch or dinner at the fantastic **Witch's Cauldron & the Milkman** (☎ 04-224 4667; mains 45-80NIS; ☎ 10am-late), one of the very best restaurants in the region. Sample the platter of gourmet goat's cheeses, all of which are made on the premises, or the hearty wild-mushroom stew.

הר הרמון خيل حرمون  
Mt Hermon, reaching 2224m above sea level, is Israel's highest mountain, though the snow-capped peak is actually in Syria. Its lower slopes encompass the only ski resort

in Israel, **Mt Hermon Ski Centre** (☎ bookings 03-606 0640; www.skihermon.co.il; admission 38NIS, chair-lift 35NIS, day-ski-pass 200NIS, equipment hire 135NIS; ☎ 8am-4pm), a tiny area but nonetheless fun to spend a day hitting the pistes during the winter months.

The ski season usually lasts from around January to late March (call ☎ 04-698 1333 for the automated snow report service, or check the resort website); opening hours vary according to season and weather conditions. The slopes aren't really all that exciting and, all-up, a day's skiing is quite pricey if you have to rent equipment, but for Israelis it's the only ski slope for several thousand miles and thus is usually extremely busy on winter weekends. The chair-lift to the top of the resort is open year round, worthwhile on a clear summer's day for the views, cool air and riot of wild flowers.

נווה אטי"ב נוה אטיף NEVE ATIV  
☎ 04

A breezy Alpine-styled mountain-side moshav set up high on the road between Nimrod settlement and Nimrod Castle, there's not much to do in this small place itself, but it's a good base for hiking in summer and skiing in winter.

### Sleeping

ElAzar (☎ 698 1530; d 420NIS; ☎) On the corner of the main road through the moshav, look for the sign topped with a bright metal rooster, and dozens of flowery window boxes. Comprising eight simply furnished but homely

rooms, all with drinks-making facilities and satellite TV, it's a decent enough place to stay. The price includes use of the community swimming pool in the summer.

**Chez Stephanie** (☎ 698 1520; chalets & cabins 300-480NIS; 📶) Run by jovial French-Israeli couple Irene and Maurice, this is a cute place tucked away at the back of Neve Ativ. To get there, drive north into Neve Ativ on Rte 989 then turn right where you see El Azar on the corner. Chez Stephanie is at the end, on the left. The hosts are extremely anxious to please, and the log cabins and smaller chalets are sweet, well equipped and particularly cosy during the snowy winter season. In the evenings, Maurice tends a well-stocked bar upstairs. Prices are negotiable off-season, midweek and for longer stays.

### Getting There & Away

Egged bus No 055 (55 minutes, 32NIS) runs to and from Katzrin, once per day in each direction.

### MAS'ADA مسعدة מסעדה

☎ 04 / pop 3000  
The smaller of the two main Druze towns in the region, Mas'ada is a place where everyone knows everyone, and few streets have names or house numbers. The inhabitants of these towns identify more strongly with Syria than with Israel – many even refusing Israeli identity papers – but that doesn't mean that Israelis receive an unfriendly welcome. Indeed, at weekends, southerners holidaying in the Golan flock to Mas'ada for cheap eats at its numerous restaurants, with their standard fare of hummus, *labane* and roasted meats. Since neighbouring establishments tend to be owned by the same family, as with **Abu Nedal & Sons** (☎ 687 0357; HaShalom St; 🍽 lunch & dinner) and the **Nedal restaurant** (☎ 698 1066; 🍽 lunch & dinner), on the main Rte 98 through town, it doesn't much matter which you pick.

### MAJDAL SHAMS مجدل شمس מגדל שמש

☎ 04 / pop 8989  
This larger, friendly Druze town has little in the way of accommodation options, so visitors only use it as a passing-through point for the Mt Hermon ski resort above. One place of note, though, is the **Shouting Hill**: it's the last, dead-end street on the east

of town, where Druze Israelis go on Fridays to shout news, often using megaphones, to friends and relatives on the opposite side of the Syrian border. Despite their strong ties with Syria, it's not easy for the Golan's Druze to get any closer than this to their Syrian friends and family; a good movie dealing with this theme of family separation is 2004's *The Syrian Bride*.

In the centre of Majdal Shams you'll see a large **statue of Sultan El-Atrash**, the Druze hero who led the 1925 revolt against the French who then ruled Syria, of which Majdal Shams was a part until 1967. You may also see, if a ceremony of any sort is in progress, swarms of men in traditional Druze attire, with white fezzes, elaborate curling moustaches and black *jalabiyya* (robes).

The **Al Marsad Centre for Human Rights in the Golan Heights** (☎ 687 0644; www.golan-marsad.org), with its offices located in Majdal Shams, is a voluntary organisation monitoring the situation of the Golan's Arab population; it offers an unpaid internship program for periods of three to six months.

### MEROM GOLAN מרום גולן מרום جولان

☎ 04  
This kibbutz was established in 1967, the first Jewish settlement in the Golan Heights after the 1967 war. The main reason to come here is for trail riding from its **Cowboy Ranch** (☎ 057 851 4497), which offers treks, breakfast, sunset and night rides, lessons, and over-nighters with real-live cowboys.

The restaurant attached, **Village Ranch** (☎ 696 0206; mains 90NIS; 🍽 noon-11pm), was created by those same hardworking cowboys in 1992, and is a decent place for replenishment following a long day in the saddle, specialising, unsurprisingly, in steaks, ribs, fillets and chops.

**MT BENTAL** הר בנטל جبل بنتل  
Towering (by Israeli standards) 1165m above sea level, this inactive volcano sports fantastic views from the top where, from an old Syrian bunker, you can see Syria, Lebanon, the Hula Valley, Mt Hermon and Mt Har Avital; allegedly a 'spy mountain' with a high-tech underground nerve centre of which Ian Fleming would be proud. Signposts on the top direct you to Damascus (60km), Amman (135km), Baghdad (800km) and Washington DC (11,800km).

**Coffee Annan** (Coffee in the Clouds; ☎ 04-682 0664; mains 30NIS; ☎ 9am-6pm) is a great place for a bite and a caffeine boost. This amusingly named place has a mainly vegetarian menu, including baked potatoes, antipasti and a delicious sweet potato and coconut milk soup. It's bright and cheerful, with lots of cakes, platefuls of cookies and a huge range of coffees.

### MITZPE QUNEITRA (QUNEITRA VIEWPOINT)

تصفيّة كونيتره قونيترا  
From this viewpoint, about 15km south of Mas'ada, you can look across to the Syrian ghost town of Quneitra, destroyed by Israel in the 1967 war. Until then, Quneitra was Syria's main Golan town, mostly inhabited by Circassians.

For over three decades following the 1973 war, the Quneitra border crossing between Israel and Syria was only used by Syrian brides marrying into Druze families and vice versa, and by Druze students going to study in Damascus. Then in 2005, the first commercial crossing of Israeli produce into Syria was accomplished, when six trucks carried 10,000 tonnes of Druze-produced apples to merchants in Syria after receiving approval from Damascus. But the UN-monitored transaction, performed by Red Cross trucks, might have been a one-off, only granted because good weather had given the region's Druze communities an exceptionally abundant apple crop. Officials in Damascus said they were doing it to help their Syrian brothers; Ismail Mer'I, a Syrian MP, demonstrated that the dispute over ownership of the Golan Heights was anything but forgotten when he said that the operation was ultimately humanitarian and had no political connotations, since the apples were planted by Syrians on Syrian land.

### KATZRIN קצרין قتسرين

☎ 04 / pop 6650  
Although ambitiously planned in the shape of a butterfly, its body being the commercial centre and wings the residential neighbourhoods, this is a beauty you can really only appreciate from the air. Planned and built in the 1970s as the new centre of the Golan region, the town has the unmistakable feel of a place that never quite bridged the gap between planning board and reality.

Katzrin is now desperately trying to reinvent itself as a cultural centre within the region, but loses out on almost all counts to the infinitely more charming moshavim throughout the Golan area. There's little reason to visit here but for one of its well-packaged attractions or to stock up on provisions before a hike, and it's best to avoid its limited accommodation options. There is a Bank Leumi ATM in the central commercial centre, as well as Superstorey supermarket.

### Sights & Activities

#### GOLAN ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM

This is a small but fairly interesting museum (☎ 696 1350; Katzrin Commercial Centre; admission with entry to Ancient Katzrin Park 24NIS; ☎ 9am-4pm Sun-Thu, 9am-2pm Fri) with locally excavated exhibits labelled in English, including lintels, pots, columns and 'juggles', which appear to be small jugs. There's also a surprisingly good multimedia presentation, complete with moving parts and holograms, on Rogem Hiri, an ancient series of vast concentric circles in the central Golan.

The highlight, however, might be the museum shop, where you can stock up on your boring-postcard collection, with a whole host of postcards depicting earthen mounds and piles of rocks, or rent an authentic biblical or Talmudic-era costume, great for those Jerusalem Syndrome moments.

#### ANCIENT KATZRIN PARK

On the eastern route out of town, the park (☎ 696 2412; combined admission with Golan Archaeological Museum 24NIS; ☎ 9am-4pm Sun-Thu, 9am-2pm Fri) houses a partly restored 3rd-century Jewish village, including the House of Rabbi Abun, the House of Uzi and the Katzrin synagogue, which was partially destroyed, probably by an earthquake, in AD 749. There's also an audiovisual presentation, which helps bring the whole thing to life.

#### MAGIC OF THE GOLAN

Housed in the new mall complex at the eastern entrance to town, just next to the industrial zone and situated next door to Burger Ranch, **Magic of Golan** (☎ 696 3625; http://etour.golan.org.il; ☎ 9am-6pm Sun-Thu, Fri 9am-3pm) is a new addition to Katzrin's tourism scene. Here you can take a 3D journey around the Golan and peruse a large-scale model of the region. Just behind the mall is the vast

Golan Heights Winery (below), a water-bottling plant and olive-oil factory, all of which offer guided tours.

### OTHER ACTIVITIES

One fun thing to do in town is take a ride in **Roger's Caleche** (☎ 682 0466, 052 328 4047), which offers horse-and-carriage tours up into the Golan region for parties of up to nine people.

### Sleeping

**Golan SPNI Field School** (☎ 696 1234; Daliyat St; d 320NIS, f & q per person 95NIS; 🍽️ 📺) A dour 1960s building at the end of a dead-end street, the Field School offers dorms for up to eight people, doubles, and 34 studio-style 'family' rooms for up to four. Not a bad option for groups of friends travelling together, it's clean and simple with showers and air-con, but rather devoid of atmosphere or life.

### Eating

**MeatShos** (☎ 696 5544; Katzrin Industrial Area; mains 50-90NIS; 🍽️ noon-midnight) Offering up good steaks and lamb chops in a bright, friendly atmosphere, this is the second-best place to eat after the Yemenite-Eastern.

**Yemenite-Eastern** (☎ 696 2412; Katzrin Commercial Centre; mains 25-50NIS; 🍽️ lunch) This tiny place serves up fantastic Yemenite speciali-

ties to hungry locals; the thick, filling soups and house specialties are aromatic and delicious.

### Getting There & Away

Bus No 15 (one hour, 25NIS) and No 19 (1¼ hours, 25NIS) connect Katzrin with Tiberias three times per day.

### GAMLA NATURE RESERVE

שמורת גמלא      منتزه جملا

An evocative scene, and story of epic struggle, straight off the pages of *Lord of the Rings* greets visitors to **Gamla** (☎ 04-682 2282; admission 23NIS; 🍽️ 8am-4pm Sat-Thu, 8am-3pm Fri), off Rte 808, where, during a Roman siege in AD 67, several thousand Jews were slaughtered and several thousand more committed mass-suicide at their city high on a rocky plateau. The 1st-century historian Flavius Josephus recorded the preceding seven-month siege and bloody battle; excerpts of his work appear on plaques at the main lookout point, which is wheelchair accessible. The remains of the city itself can be accessed by a steep hike, which takes you from the lookout down to the valley below, then up the ridge on the opposite side.

Visitors arrive at Gamla not only because of its history, but also because of the dozens of **Griffon vultures** that nest on the cliffs. It's

a majestic sight to watch at close range as they soar over the valley below. The park also contains Israel's highest perennial **waterfall**, which drops 50m to a pool and can be visited by a strenuous hiking route that passes a field full of **dolmens** (grave markers for the nomads who inhabited the Golan area around 4000 years ago).

Midweek, it's worth calling before visiting the park since it's frequently closed for army manoeuvres. Note that last entry is one hour before the park closes.

### TSFAT

צפת      صفد

☎ 06 / pop 27,300

Huddled on top of Israel's third-highest peak, Tsfat (Safed, Zefad, Tzfat or Sfat) is an evocative mountain town with a rich heritage of Jewish mysticism, a rambling artists' quarter and magical views. The oblique labyrinth of cobbled streets is lined with medieval synagogues and crumbling stone houses punctuated by turquoise doorways and heavy *hamsas* (a hand-shaped amulet featuring the evil eye).

It is an idyllic and devout place with a slightly bohemian atmosphere, where Hasidic Jews and New Age spiritualists blend Kabbalistic tradition and messianic enthusiasm.

In an age where Kabbalah has been made popular by the rich and famous, religious tourists are now big business in Tsfat, coming from all over the world to learn the Torah, visit the graves of the great mystics such as Rabbi Isaac Luria (the Ari) who are buried in the town's haunting cemetery, and indulge in an energising look into their own souls.

For travellers, Tsfat provides an ethereal place to get lost for a day or two.

### History

Tsfat was founded sometime in the 2nd century BC as a *masu'of* (beacon) village – one of a chain of hill-top fire sites stretching to Jerusalem. The beacons were lit to mark the beginning of a new month or holy day. During the First Revolt (AD 66–73), Tsfat was fortified by Josephus, leader of the Jewish forces in the Galilee.

The Crusaders, led by Fulke, King of Anjou, also chose to site a citadel here to control the highway to Damascus. Fulke's fortification, known as Saphet, was destroyed by Saladin, rebuilt by the Knights

Templar and destroyed once again by the Sultan Beybars in 1266.

During the 15th and 16th centuries the Jewish community of Safad, or Safat, as it was called, was enlarged by an influx of immigrants fleeing the Inquisition and persecution in Spain. Many of the new arrivals were Kabbalists, or mystical truth seekers (see also p32). The name comes from the Hebraic root *kbl*, meaning 'to receive', and the movement originated in the region of Tsfat around the time of the First Revolt, before being carried abroad with the Diaspora. It flourished particularly among the Jews of the Iberian Peninsula, and for a time Spain was a world centre of Jewish learning and culture. With the relocation of the Kabbalists that mantle passed to Tsfat.

In the latter part of the 18th century Tsfat welcomed a further influx of Jewish Hasidim, this time from Russia. However, in 1837 an earthquake destroyed much of the town, killing up to 5000 people and leveling many of its 69 synagogues.

As throughout all of Palestine, increased Jewish immigration was intensifying Arab hostility to the newcomers. Violence between the two had been sporadic but with the growth of nationalistic aspirations on both sides, clashes became increasingly frequent. During the 1920s and '30s there was rioting in Tsfat with loss of life on both sides, culminating in a pitched battle for the town in 1948. Though outnumbered, the Jews prevailed and the Arabs were forced to flee.

From 1951 the former Arab quarter became a flourishing artists' colony with many of the Arab properties, including the main mosque, being turned into gallery spaces and studios. Over the last few years many of these galleries have become home to large Hasidic families who again started flocking here from Jerusalem and North America during the 1980s. Newly arrived immigrants mostly from the former Soviet Union and Ethiopia live clustered in sterile apartment blocks outside the old city.

### Orientation

The highest town in the country, Tsfat sits 800m above sea level on a huddle of hill tops. Central Tsfat is on a single hill top and small enough to cover on foot. The bus station is on the east side and the old town centre directly opposite on the west side – the hill

### A CONNOISSEUR'S DELIGHT

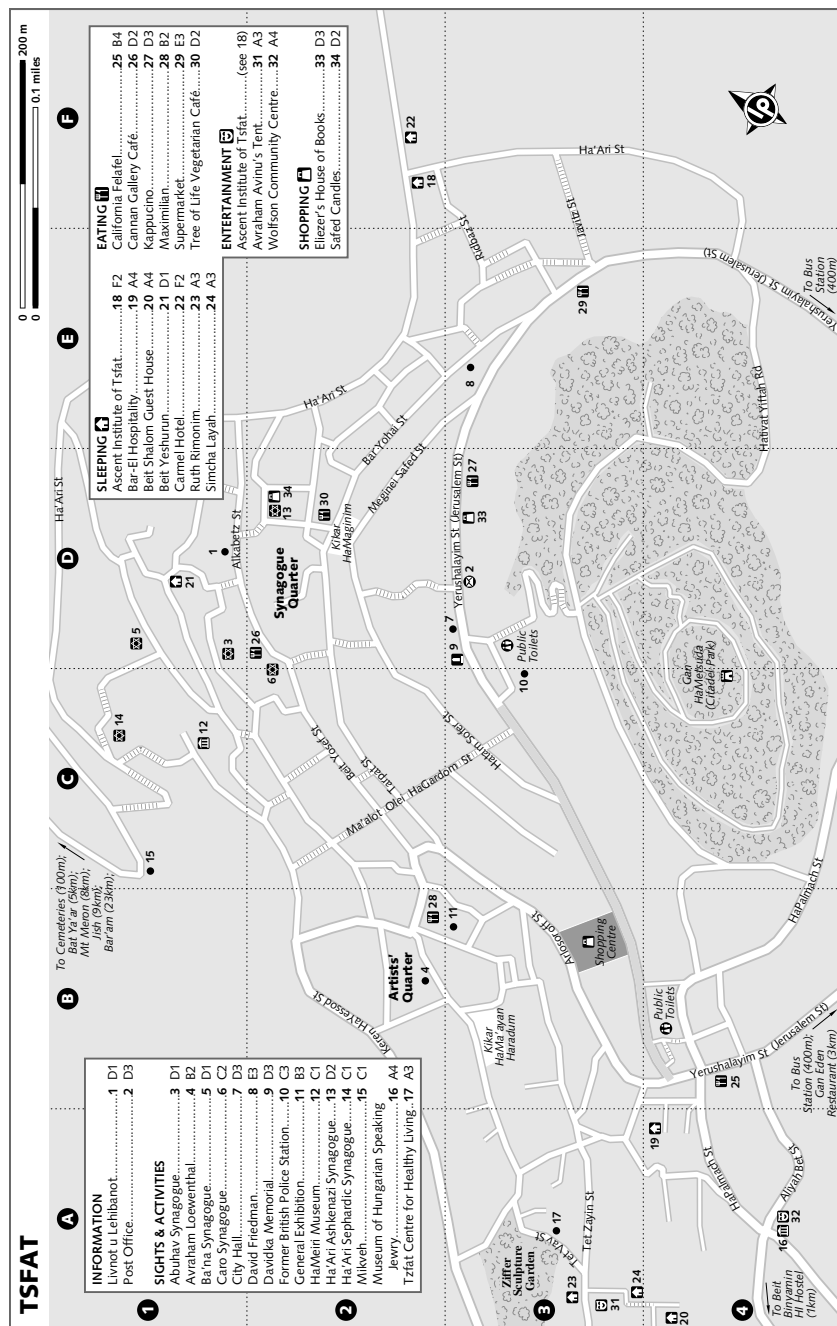
Unlikely as it may seem for such a small country, Israeli wines are gradually taking their place on the international scene, many of them harking from the Upper Galilee and the Golan region. Its well-drained volcanic basalt soil, cool breezes and elevated position appeal to the fickle grape, whilst its variety of microclimates mean that a large number of different kinds can be grown in quite a small area, including Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon.

The result has been a whole host of vineyards, many family-run, popping up all over the place, most being happy to receive guests to sample or buy a few bottles of their much-cherished plonk. The largest, the **Golan Heights Winery** (☎ 04-696 8409/8435; Katzrin Industrial Park; www.golanwines.co.il; 🍽️ Sun-Thu 8.30-5pm, Fri 8.30am-1.30pm), invites guests to sample its famous Yarden wines, along with a guided tour of the cellars and bottling plant; advance reservations are preferred.

Others worth visiting are the **Mountain Winery** (☎ 04-687 1122, 050 522 0248; 🍽️ Sun-Thu 10am-4pm, Fri & Sat 10am-5pm) in Odem, which doesn't require advance reservations, and two wonderful boutique wineries in Ramot: **Pelter Winery** (☎ 052 866 6385/4; www.pelterwinery.co.il), from which brothers Nir and Tal Pelter supply some of Israel's best restaurants, and **Maor Winery** (☎ 052 851 5079; www.maorwinery.com), run by friendly winemaker Danny Maor. For both these wineries, call in advance to arrange a visit.

To complete an afternoon's tipping, there's the fine and well-known **Chateau Golan** (☎ 04-660 0026; www.chateaugolan.com), at Moshav Eliad. Advance reservations are required, and it's well worth booking a visit to sample its excellent, extensive wine list filled with Merlots, Syrahs (the local equivalent of Shiraz) and some very tasty blends.





is scored by the restaurant-studded Yerushalayim (Jerusalem) St, which makes a complete loop between the two. The old quarters that make up the heart of central Tsfat tumble down from Yerushalayim St in a snakes-and-ladders compendium of ankle-straining stairways and slithering alleys. They are divided uncompromisingly in two by Ma'alot Olei HaGardom, a broad, stiff stairway running down from Yerushalayim St; the area to the north of the stairway is known as the Synagogue Quarter, while south of the steps is Tsfat's Artists' Quarter.

## Information

### EMERGENCY

In medical emergencies call ☎ 911.

**Magen David Adom** (☎ 692 0333) Next to the bus station.

**Police** (☎ 693 0444)

**Rivka Ziv Hospital** (☎ 682 8811; HaRambam St)

### MONEY

All the bank branches are on Yerushalayim St, west of Citadel Park.

### POST

The main post and telephone office is on HaPalmach St (look for the radar dish next door, visible from the corner of Aliyah Bet St). A convenient branch post office is at 37 Yerushalayim St.

### TOURIST INFORMATION

**Bar-El Hospitality** (☎ 692 3661; thebarel@yahoo.com) Has a huge range of contacts in Tsfat and whatever you want to do – yoga, classes with a local artist, history tours, healing – they can set you up or at least point you in the right direction.

**Livnot u'Lehibanot** (ToBbuild & To Be Built; ☎ 692 4427; laurie@livnot.com; ☎ 8.30am–4pm Sun–Thu) Runs the official information centre, staffed by English-speaking Laurie, who gives out maps and brochures on the area as well as lists of local guides, hostels and guest rooms, and contact information for various organisations in Tsfat.

## Sights

### GAN HAMETSUDA (CITADEL PARK)

Gan HaMetsuda is the pleasant breeze-cooled park and viewpoint at the summit of Mt Safed. Little evidence remains of the Crusader-era fortress that once stood up here despite the fact that it was at one time the largest in the Middle East, funded by the bishop of Marseilles who raised a princely

sum (the equivalent of US\$40 million today) for its construction. Its outer walls once followed the line now marked by Yerushalayim St but you can only see remains of one of the inner walls on Hativat Yiftah Rd.

### YERUSHALAYIM & MA'ALOT OLEI HAGARDOM STREETS

On Yerushalayim St, a few metres south of City Hall, the **Davidka Memorial** incorporates an example of the primitive and unreliable Davidka mortar made by the Jews and used to great effect in 1948. Somewhat dangerous to use, it did little physical damage but the story goes that it made such a loud noise that it scared the living daylight out of the Arabs.

Across from the memorial is the **former British police station**, riddled with bullet holes – the result of Arab-Jewish skirmishing in May 1948. For many years subsequently the place served as an income tax office and obvious jokes are made about the 'real' reason for the bullets.

Just south of the police station, and over the road, is Ma'alot Olei HaGardom St, the wide stairway that leads down from Yerushalayim St. It was built by the British after the riots of 1929 to divide the town and keep the Arab community (living mainly in what's now the Artists' Quarter) and Jewish community (inhabiting the Synagogue Quarter) apart. Tarpat St, which crosses Ma'alot Olei HaGardom St at its midpoint, is the main street where the rioting took place. Note the ruins of 16th-century Jewish houses that were built using stones removed from the Crusader wall up the hill.

Look back from Ma'alot Olei HaGardom St, across Yerushalayim St, and you'll notice on the roof of the building at the top the searchlight remaining from a one-time British gun position.

### SYNAGOGUE QUARTER

The Synagogue Quarter, the town's old traditional Jewish neighbourhood, is centred on what's now known as Kikar HaMaganim (Defenders' Sq) – or just HaKikar (the Square) – reached by descending the steps just north of City Hall. The name refers to the fact that the building that now houses the Tiferet Gallery was, during the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, the headquarters of the Haganah.

Within a few minutes' walk of the square are all of Tsfat's major Kabbalist synagogues. They are usually open throughout the day to visitors, and admission is free although donations are requested. Suitable clothing must be worn – no shorts, no bare shoulders – and cardboard yarmulkes are provided. Photography is permitted in the Synagogue Quarter except on Shabbat. If you are a little short of time, then the two to visit are Ha'Ari Ashkenazi and Caro synagogues.

### Ha'Ari Ashkenazi Synagogue

Just down from Kikar HaMaginim, on the right, this is one of two synagogues dedicated to 'the Ari', one of the major figures of Jewish mysticism (for more on mystic Judaism, see p32). While his real name was Yitzhak Luria, he was known as Ari (Lion in Hebrew), an acronym of the words Adoneinu Rabbeinu Yitzhak – 'Our master our Rabbi Isaac'.

Born in Jerusalem in 1534, Rabbi Yitzhak moved to Cairo, where he quickly mastered conventional Jewish teachings and began to immerse himself in the study of the Zohar (Book of Wonders; a major work of the Kabbalah that had recently been printed for the first time), and adopted the life of a recluse. He retreated to the banks of the Nile, and for seven years secluded himself in an isolated cottage, giving himself up entirely to meditation. In 1569, after some 12 years of study, he brought his family to Tsfat where, despite his youth, he had a tremendous impact on the community of his time, and a profound influence on Judaism to this day. Many customs still celebrated now, such as Kabbalat Shabbat and the festival of Tu b'Shvat (the trees' new year) were introduced by the Ari. The Ari taught the secrets of the Torah to a select group of rabbis until his death in a sudden plague in 1572.

Ha'Ari Ashkenazi Synagogue was built after his death on the edge of a forest (in those days it was outside the city) where the white-robed Kabbalists would gather, facing the setting sun on Friday afternoon, and welcome the Sabbath. The original building was destroyed in an 1852 earthquake.

The olive-wood ark was carved in the 19th century and represents over 10 years' work. The *bimah* (central platform) bears a shrapnel hole in the side facing the door from an Arab attack during the 1948 siege. The synagogue was packed with worship-

pers at the time but the congregation was bowed in prayer and the projectile flew over their heads – the hole is now stuffed with messages to God.

At the rear of the synagogue, in a small room, is a chair carved at about the same time as the ark. Called Kise Eliyahu (Elijah's Chair), it's used during the circumcision ceremony and legend has it that any Jewish couple who sits here will have a son within a year.

### Caro Synagogue

Rabbi Yosef Caro was another leading Kabbalist. He was born in Spain in 1488, and after the expulsion of the Jews in 1492 he moved to the Balkans, arriving in Tsfat in 1535. He later became the chief rabbi here, but he attained fame for his important written works that included *Beit Yosef*, which took 32 years to write and is a compilation of Jewish law and custom. A condensed version of the book, the *Shulchan Aruch* (The Set Table), is basically regarded as the extensive blueprint for living an Orthodox Jewish life today. So influential are Rabbi Caro's teachings and their interpretations of Jewish law that modern-day rabbis still refer to him for guidance with contemporary issues.

Destroyed in the 1837 earthquake and rebuilt around 1847, the synagogue stands above Rabbi Caro's yeshiva (religious seminary). The ark contains three ancient Torah scrolls: the one on the right is from Persia and is about 200 years old; the centre one, from Iraq, is about 300 years old; and the scroll on the left, from Spain, is over 500 years old.

### Abuhav Synagogue

This synagogue is believed to have been built by followers of Rabbi Yitzhak Abuhav in the 1490s, using a design based on the Kabbalah. The four central pillars represent the four elements that, according to Kabbalists, make up all of creation. The dome has 10 windows to represent the Commandments, pictures of the 12 tribes of Israel that represent Jewish unity, illustrations of the musical instruments used in the Temple, pomegranate trees (the fruit of which traditionally has 613 seeds – the same number as the commandments in the Torah), and the Dome of the Rock, a reminder of the destruction of the Temple.

The silver candelabrum hanging opposite the central ark is a memorial to the Holocaust victims.

### Ba'na Synagogue

Named after Rabbi Yossi Ba'na (the Builder) who is buried here, this synagogue is also known as the Shrine of the White Saint – in Hebrew it's called Ha'Tsodik Ha-Lavan. This is based on a legend that tells of the time when a Turkish ruler of Tsfat forbade Jews from buying white chickens to slaughter for the *kaparot* ceremony (an ancient custom of sacrifice), which happens on the day before Yom Kippur. The distressed Jews prayed at Rabbi Ba'na's tomb for a way out of the problem and the result was that all their dark chickens turned pure white.

Unusually, Rabbi Ba'na is buried in the courtyard of the synagogue – to the right of the entrance.

The synagogue is not normally open to visitors, except in the afternoons when children's classes are held here.

### Ha'Ari Sephardic Synagogue

On the lower slopes of the Old City, just up from the cemeteries, this synagogue is built on the site where Ari prayed. The small room on the left in the back is said to be where he learned the mystical texts with the prophet Elijah.

In the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, the synagogue, which faced a then-Arab neighbourhood, was pressed into service as a military post and a machine gun was set up by the window above the ark.

### HaMeiri House

Established by Yehzkel HaMeiri, a fifth-generation Tsfatian, this beautiful old building houses the interesting **Hameiri Museum** (☎ 697 1307; admission 14NIS; ☒ 9am-2pm Sun-Thu & 9am-1pm Fri), which outlines the story of Tsfat's Jewish community over the last 200 years and its struggle to survive. Each floor is dedicated to a different aspect of the community's life. The presentation includes collections of documents, papers, ancient books, utensils from homes and workplaces, clothes, furniture and holy objects. There are also photographs, recordings and video tapes of both sites and older residents.

### CEMETERIES

A wander through the ancient cemetery of Tsfat is an enchanting experience at any time, but it's particularly mystical in the early evening when you can walk in the glow of the *yahrzeit* candles (lit on the anniversary of someone's death), often to the haunting echoes of prayers and chanting psalms.

Both the old and the new cemeteries lie below the Synagogue Quarter on the lower western slopes of Mt Safed. The small building to the left of the path that leads down from Ha'Ari Sephardic Synagogue is the Ari's *mikveh* (ritual bath), which many Jews believe has exceptional powers of purification. Open 24 hours, you can often hear groups of shrieking young religious men taking a rather icy late-night dip.

The ancient cemetery contains the graves of many of the famous Kabbalists who believed that Tsfat's pure air would benefit the souls of those buried here and fly them immediately to the Garden of Eden. While many of the graves are pretty dilapidated, anyone who was remotely famous has had their stones painted white or bright blue.

Next to the grave of the Ari is buried Rabbi Shlomo AlKabetz, another of Tsfat's great mystics, a poet who is best known as the author of the hymn *L'cha Dodi*, which is sung every Shabbat. Rabbi Caro is buried just down the path from the Ari.

The domed tomb was built by the Karaites of Damascus and is believed by them to contain the body of the biblical prophet, Hosea. Legend has it that also buried on this hill are Hannah and her seven sons, martyred by the Greeks on the eve of the Maccabean Revolt. The feeling of fatigue experienced when you climb the hill is said to be due to walking over their graves.

The more recent cemeteries contain victims of the 1948 siege and, at the bottom of the slope, seven of the eight members of the Irgun and Lehi who were hanged by the British in Akko Citadel Prison. The eighth is buried at Rosh Pina, where he lived.

In a small grove at the bottom of the cemetery, 22 high-school students killed in a terrorist attack in 1974 at Ma'alot are buried in a small grove. They lie next to the 11 victims of Avivim, on the border with Lebanon, who were killed four years earlier when terrorists attacked their school bus.

## ARTISTS' QUARTER

The part of the old town south of the Ma'alot Olei HaGardom stairway used to be the Arab quarter, but since the Arabs' defeat and subsequent withdrawal in 1948 the area developed as an artists' colony – a real boon at a time when there was no public-funded art galleries in Israel.

For Tsfat the '50s and '60s were an exciting time as some of the country's most celebrated painters, such as Yitzhak Frenkel and Moshe Castel, inspired by the stunning landscapes and mystical traditions, opened studios and held exhibitions in the town. Art lovers escaped the heat in Tel Aviv and spent their summers holidaying in the new hotels and guesthouses.

Since the influx of Hasidim in the 1980s and the move towards a more religious atmosphere, the quarter is no longer flourishing. There are still a lot of artists around, but a great many, unfortunately, seem to belong to the 'Sunday afternoon' school of painting. Interesting ideas such as an artist-in-residence program have been floated, but there seems to be little interest from the city council at this time.

The **General Exhibition** (☎ 692 0087; 📍 9am–5pm Sun–Thu, 10am–2pm Fri & Sat), housed in a white-domed Ottoman-era mosque just a little to the southwest of Ma'alot Olei HaGardom St, features a representative selection of work. The more exciting pieces come from the new wave of Russian immigrant artists, whose work is also on display. If you see anything of interest you can ask for directions to the particular artist's studio to see more. Most of the galleries and studios around the quarter are open to visitors, with many artists happy to talk about their work and even happier to make a sale.

On a more positive note, Tsfat is now gaining a reputation for modern conceptual art inspired by the Kabbalah. Several artists have developed their own system of translating kabbalistic concepts into an array of incredibly detailed graphic shapes and colours. Definitely check out the fascinating works of **Avraham Loewenthal** (Tzfat Gallery of Mystical Art; ☎ 692 3051; www.kabbwalahart.com; 22 Tet Vav St) and **David Friedman** (☎ 697 2702; www.kosmickabbalah.com; 38 Bar Yochai St), who both give short introductions on Kabbalah to any interested passers-by.

Much of the charm of the Artists' Quarter is still derived from its traditional Arab architecture and meandering streets. One of the few overt reminders of the area's Islamic heritage is the 13th-century **Red Mosque**, built by Sultan Beybars after he drove the Crusaders out of Tsfat. The building is in quite a poor state but it has a typically splendid Mamluk entrance.

## MUSEUM OF HUNGARIAN SPEAKING JEWRY

This collection of folklore exhibits at the **Museum of Hungarian Speaking Jewry** (☎ 692 3880; www.hungjewmus.org.il; Kikar Haazmout; admission free; 📍 9am–1pm Sun–Fri) depicts the vibrant history of the Jews living in Hungary, Transylvania, Slovakia, Carpathian-Russia, Bachka, Banat and Burgenland before WWII. The museum's founders Chava and Yosef Lustig, long time Tsfat residents and Holocaust survivors, are passionate about preserving this rich past, regularly returning to Eastern Europe to collect interesting new pieces for the museum, from children's books to religious antiques, items of clothing, art and old diaries.

## Activities

The **Tsfat Centre for Healthy Living** (☎ 692 3535; 78 Tet Vav St) offers interesting courses and one-off seminars on everything from basket weaving to Chinese medicine and permaculture from their rooftop garden. Miriam Friedman regularly runs both women-only and mixed **yoga classes** (☎ 697 2702; per person 25NIS) at the centre, but is also available for private sessions.

## Courses

Short courses in Torah teachings, the Kabbalah and general Jewish mysticism are available at the well-known **Ascent Institute of Tsfat** (☎ 692 1364; www.ascentofsafed.com); for an introduction to the concept, check out the websites www.kabalaonline.org and www.thirtysevenbooks.com. If you want to stay for longer, there are three English-language yeshivot that welcome students from virtually any Jewish background. Religion in Tsfat, whilst incorporating the joyousness of the Baal Shem Tov, is a serious business that will tolerate intelligent questioning but is uncomfortable with criticism. An ashram it is not.

## Tours

For an excellent half-day walking tour of Tsfat get in touch with **Aviva Minoff** (☎ 050 540 9187, 054 210 9187; www.zsat.co.il; 2 people 150NIS), who tailors the tours to individual interests like Judaism, archaeology and mysticism. Otherwise, pick up a copy of Yisrael Shalem's *Safed: Six Guided Tours in and Around the Mystical City* (30NIS), available at **Eliezer's House of Books** (☎ 697 0329; 37 Yerushalijim St).

## Festivals & Events

Every summer (July or August) Tsfat hosts the annual **Klezmer Dance Festival** (p391), where the squares and alleys of the old city come alive with the strains of this wonderful Eastern European Jewish soul music. The free music extravaganza starts around eight each night, and goes to the early hours. Accommodation is hard to find at this time so book ahead.

## Sleeping

### BUDGET

**Beit Binyamin HI Hostel** (☎ 697 3514; fax 692 1086; 1 Lohamei HaGeta'ot St; dm/s/d with breakfast 89/153/224NIS; 📍) Sitting at the edge of town, this hostel is about 2km (and a stiff slog) from the town centre. While the rooms are cleaner than a hospital, this place is more than a little institutional and borders on totally depressing in winter. Unfortunately it remains the cheapest option in town. Take bus No 6 or 7 from the central bus station.

**Simcha Layah** (☎ 692 5258; simla@zahav.net.il; d/tr with breakfast 250/300NIS; 📍) Swinging the one room at Simcha Layah's old city home is a great introduction to the real Tsfat, so definitely try and book ahead. Situated off the pretty central courtyard, the room sleeps up to five people and was being renovated a touch at the time of research. The effervescent Simcha Laya is a caterer who can whip up an excellent breakfast of *shakshuka* (eggs cooked in tomato sauce with onion) and *melawach* (Yemenite bread) while discussing Kabbalah and where to find the most interesting art in town.

**Beit Shalom Guest House** (Shalom Inn; ☎ 697 0445; 3 Korchak St; small s/d 125/250NIS, large s/d 150/300NIS; 📍) Staying at the friendly Beit Shalom feels like spending the night at your grandparents' house, with cosy rooms, starched sheets and endless cups of free tea. But wherever did they get that col-

lection of mid-20th-century *schmei drei* (junk) from? Like at grandma's, the kitchen is always stocked with the basics such as eggs, milk and bread, and inevitably you will have to fight with someone for the best room in the place – a light-filled escape at the top of the house with a private roof terrace.

**Ascent Institute of Tsfat** (☎ 692 1364; www.ascentofsafed.com; 2 Ha'Ar'i St; dm/d with breakfast in summer 60/180NIS, Friday dm/d with breakfast & dinner 120/240NIS) For Jews interested in learning more about Jewish mysticism, law and philosophy, staying at Ascent with its calendar of regular classes (10NIS rebate on the room price per class attended) can be an inspiring experience and a way to meet new people. The lovely hostel complex has a library and a rooftop terrace for enjoying breathtaking sunsets. Arrangements are made for Shabbat meals and festivals with local families, hikes and city tours. Unfortunately, if you have no interest in learning it's very difficult to avoid the enthusiastic staff, who have no qualms about guilt-tripping you into a course on 'Kabbalah and Love' – whether or not you are a Lonely Planet author.

### MIDRANGE

**Carmel Hotel** (☎ 692 0053; 8 Ha'Ar'i St; d US\$60) Kicking back on a worn old sofa on the balcony of the Carmel Hotel with a book and the wonderful view is a great way to end a day wandering around Tsfat. Owner Shlomo takes a hands-off approach, so the feeling is more like having the run of a big family house than a hotel. The rooms are super clean, and all have balcony access. Some of the original details of the 85-year-old house remain – such as the interesting mosaic floors.

**Beit Yeshurun** (☎ 697 3167; www.yeshurun.com; Abbo Sq; d 500NIS; 📍) Boutique accommodation – Tsfat style – with two sparsely decorated units featuring stone walls, wood-panelled ceilings, arched windows and well-equipped kitchens in the heart of the Synagogue Quarter. Someone with an eye for detail (no doubt Roni Yeshurun, a graphic designer) has added the occasional rug, mood lighting and interesting object to good effect, though the star of the show is the vine-covered roof garden. The three-room family unit (sleeps up to six) is par-

ticularly good value for a longer visit. A minimum two-night booking is required.

#### TOP END

**Bar-El Hospitality** (☎ 692 3661; www.bar-el.com; 23 Yod Zayin St; d US\$125; 🍷 🍷) Weaving through the cobbled backstreets of the Artists' Quarter, look out for the Bar-El's purple door. Inside is a beautiful, vaulted 150-year-old Arab house, lovingly restored by animated ex-New Yorker Genine and her chef-husband Ronen. Their B&B sleeps up to five people in an attractive suite designed by a local artist and featuring revealed stone, stained glass and mosaics. Guests can relax under the trellis of the cushioned roof terrace, which has the ubiquitous Tsfat views. The Bar-El's are real foodies, currently catering for groups with lavish vegetarian/fish buffets served in the courtyard. At the time of writing they were building a restaurant next door, which will be open on Shabbat.

**Ruth Rimonim** (☎ 692 0665; www.rimonim.com; Tet Zayin St; s/d 765/900NIS; 🍷 🍷) Housed in a converted Ottoman-era post house in the Artists' Quarter, for a long time this was the most atmospheric place to stay in town. Unfortunately, while the cosy stone-walled common areas with their heavy furnishings and hanging plants retain their original charm, as does the pretty outdoor area and pool, the standard rooms feel dated (more dowdy '70s than anything historic). The Rimonim chain has obviously spent money on the new spa, which has the full range of cosmetic and relaxation treatments.

#### Eating

Asking a local where to find the best food in Tsfat is generally met with a long, embarrassed pause. Unfortunately, the stunning views from most of the restaurants are much more exciting than anything you will find on your plate. There's a fruit-and-vegetable market on Wednesday and a supermarket at the eastern end of Yerushalayim St near the Javits St steps. Note that all the restaurants listed are closed for Shabbat, as is the supermarket.

**California Felafel** (☎ 692 0678; Yerushalayim St; mains 15NIS; 🍷 Sun-Thu 8am-11pm, Fri 8am-3pm) Next to the bridge, this is the long-running favourite for street food of shwarma and pita.

**Kappucino** (☎ 052 595 5909; 35 Yerushalayim St; mains 20NIS; 🍷 breakfast & lunch; 🍷 🍷) Despite

being on Yerushalayim St there is no view to speak of, just a delicious all-day breakfast, free wif-fi, cheery service and great coffee beloved by all the Anglos in town.

**Canaan Gallery Cafe** (☎ 697 4449; 47 Beit Yosef St; mains 30NIS; 🍷 10am-6.30pm) Duck into this gallery café to escape the busloads of day trippers who squash into the narrow alleyways of the Artists' Quarter, and you'll never want to leave. An absolute haven with gorgeous views, soothing music and interesting art, it's easy to see how the owners – artists Orna and Yair Moore – find their inspiration. Coffee and light meals such as quiches and sandwiches are served all day.

**Tree of Life Vegetarian Café** (☎ 056 839 110; mains 40NIS; 🍷 lunch & dinner Sun-Thu, lunch Sat) This hole-in-the-wall spot at HaMaginim Sq doesn't look too promising at first – but if you can avoid the depressing inside tables and grab a seat in the sun, this is the place for cheap, hugely tasty dishes that scream healthy eating. Try the energiser salad with teriyaki tofu or if you draw the line at the soy bean, pizza, burgers and hearty soups are all on the menu. The service is delightful, the portions 'American' to say the least, and the people-watching some of the best in the country.

**Maximilian** (☎ 050 757 7 474; Artists' Quarter; mains 44NIS; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner Sun-Thu, lunch & dinner Fri) Next to the General Exhibition, this new café-restaurant is getting positive reviews for its attempts at culinary adventurism, such as with an interesting dish of fresh figs filled with local goat's cheese in a berry sauce. There is also a range of good pastas, salads and freshly squeezed juices, which are served in the sunny courtyard outside. There was talk of putting in a sushi bar downstairs at the time of writing – but no-one's holding their breath.

**Gan Eden** (☎ 697 2434; Mt Canaan; mains 70NIS; 🍷 noon-midnight Sun-Thu, noon-5pm Fri) It's worth the taxi ride (17NIS) to Mt Canaan to sample the Mediterranean flavours and inviting atmosphere of this picturesque stone restaurant with a lovely garden and views to Mt Meron. It's a family affair, with chef Yael in the kitchen and husband Raffi working the floor. Yael recommends the selection of oven-baked fish (there is no meat or chicken served) but we say don't miss the scrumptious antipasti selection or dare to go home without a peek at the dessert menu.

#### Entertainment

Unless there is a crazy Hasidic *fabrangen* (party) going down or a late-night Jewish learning fest, Tsfat is a town that goes to bed early.

**Avraham Avinu's Tent** (☎ 692 5714; Tet Zayin St) When there is music to be heard, locals head to this makeshift bomb shelter-cum-bohemian lounge, with Indian-style throws and bamboo furniture. Unfortunately it's only open when there is something on so keep your ears open and check out any street posters.

**Wolfson Community Centre** (☎ 697 1222; cnr HaPalmach & Aliyah Bet Sts) Originally built as a Turkish caravanserai, this is the venue for occasional music concerts throughout the course of the year and a musical workshop in the summer.

**Ascent Institute of Tsfat** (☎ 692 1364; www.ascentofsfad.com; 2 Ha'ari St; admission 10NIS) Talking about crazy Hasidic *fabrangen*, Ascent throws a party every Saturday night with live music, dancing and a whole lot of Torah thrown in.

#### Shopping

**Safed Candles** (☎ 692 3105; www.safedcandles.com; Najara St; 🍷 9am-7pm Sun-Thu, Fri 9am-12.30pm) You can find them all over Israel these days, but there's still something special about visiting the actual candle gallery with its vivid range of dripping beeswax sculptures and Havdalah, Channukah and Shabbat candles, all for sale. Next to Ha'ari Ashkenazi Synagogue.

**Eliezer's House of Books** (☎ 697 0329; 37 Yerushalayim St) Eliezer sells a full line of Torah-based books in English, Hebrew, French, Russian and Spanish. If you can't squeeze the whole Zohar in your backpack they also ship anywhere in the world.

#### Getting There & Away

Buses run to Haifa (No 361, 34NIS, two hours) every hour until 9pm (5.45pm on Friday), hourly to Tiberias (20NIS, one hour) until 7pm (4pm on Friday), and twice daily to Tel Aviv (846, 51NIS) but only in the morning.

#### AROUND TSFAT

**Mt Meron** הר מירון جبل מירון On the eve of **Lag B'Omer** tens of thousands of Jewish pilgrims, from the ultraorthodox to young American students, make a trad-

itional procession carrying ancient Torah scrolls. It starts in Tsfat's Synagogue Quarter and ends 9km northwest at Mt Meron, the site of the tomb of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, 2nd-century author of the Zohar, the Book of Wonders, the major work of Jewish mysticism.

The intensity of this procession is something amazing to experience, with the whole night given over to frantic praying, singing, dancing around bonfires and celebrating the festive 33rd day of the seven weeks of mourning (which begin at Passover and end at Shavuot), as well as Rabbi Shimon, who died on this day. It is also customary for many three-year-old boys to receive their first haircut on Mt Meron, a cause for even more rejoicing.

From the **tomb of Rabbi Shimon** a path leads down to the right to a cave where it's believed that Hillel the Elder, a famous Jewish scholar who lived in Jerusalem in the 1st century BC, is buried with his 30 disciples. The cave is often mentioned by medieval pilgrims.

Close by the tombs of Rabbi Shimon and his son Ele'azar lies a deep gorge. Beyond it, on top of the hill, is the tomb of Rabbi Shammai and the rock known as the **Throne of the Messiah**. According to tradition, when the Messiah comes he will sit on this rock and Elijah will blow a trumpet to announce the event.

**Bikta Be Kadita** (Cabin in Kadita; ☎ 04-692 1963; cabins 550-1200NIS; 🍷) is a fabulous, small place perched high up on a hill side 3.5km from Meron Junction. Because of its out-of-the-way location, it's hard to reach without a car and it's best to call in advance for directions. Consisting of six eclectic cabins for two to four people – one made from an old railway carriage – it's a peaceful, artsy place full of dogs, cats, chickens and highly vocal frogs, with lavish home-made breakfasts and incredibly friendly hosts. It's highly recommended for a tranquil escape from the cares of the modern world, aided by plenty of wine from Kadita's own small vineyard.

**Moshav Amirim** אמירים اميريم This peaceful vegetarian retreat in the forest on the lower ridge of Mt Meron is known for its excellent organic food, home-made wine and homy guesthouses. Amirim locals are passionate about vegetarianism and very interested in alternative health – check

the board at the entrance to the village for the huge range of yoga teachers, shiatsu practitioners, naturopaths, tarot readers and Chinese herbalists working here. As it's a popular holiday spot for young Israelis, definitely book ahead on the weekend, when a two-night minimum stay is normally required.

British expat **Phillip Campbell** (alitamirim@hotmail.com) runs a clearing house system for sleeping options, which range from single rooms in family homes to sweet little rustic cottages such as **Dalia's Wooden Cabins** (☎ 04-698 9054; dalia\_gu@walla.co.il; d 590NIS), which come with a free aromatic beauty treatment. Dalia, a former nutritionist, also has a very good restaurant, the oldest on the moshav, with a hearty set menu.

It seems that every second family runs a café in their living room, all serving similar vegetarian/vegan plates, but **Hase'uda Ha'aharona** (The Last Supper; ☎ 04-698 9788; mains 100NIS; 🍴 lunch & dinner Thu-Sun) near the entrance to the moshav is a standout, known for its excellent use of herbs – there are over 40 types in the garden – and a dynamic mix of dishes. Reservations are required.

To get to Amirim take bus No 361 or 501 from Haifa (26.50NIS, one hour) or Tsfat (13.50NIS, 20 minutes), which leave every hour and stop in Amirim.

By car, take Rte 85 (Akko–Amiad) until Khanania Junction. Turn to road 886 to Tsfat. About 5km later take a right into Amirim.

**Jish** الجش ג'יש  
This serene Christian Arab village 4km north of Meron is notable because most of its inhabitants are of the Maronite faith and originally came from Lebanon. This was an important town in ancient times, known as Gush HaLa'av (Abundance of Milk). Yohanan, a leader of the Jewish Revolt against the Romans in AD 66, came from here, and the town was renowned for its olive oil.

On the outskirts of the village are the tombs of Shamai'a and Avtalion, two famous Jewish sages who taught in Jerusalem at the beginning of the 1st century. In a

small valley 2km east of the village, hikers can explore the remains of an ancient synagogue (3rd or 4th century) amid gorgeous fig and olive groves.

Jish also has a name for good hospitality. Definitely make a stop at **Jascala** (☎ 04-698 7762; 🍴 lunch & dinner Mon-Sat, dinner Sun) restaurant, which serves superb Lebanese dishes. If you make it past the range of incredible salads – the *fattoush* (bread salad) is the best bet – mains include *shishbarak* (lamb and mushroom dumplings) and unbelievable fried-pastry dishes.

**Bar'am** ברעם ברעם  
Almost the entire façade of the 3rd-century synagogue at **Bar'am National Park** (☎ 04-698 9301; adult/child 12/6NIS; 🍴 8am-5pm Apr-Sep, 8am-4pm Oct-Mar) has been preserved, making it, like Capernaum, one of the best examples of its kind in Israel and the Palestinian Territory. The ancient synagogue was constructed from beautiful hewn stones, with exquisite stone engravings and an imposing central gate. The grand size of the building shows that a particularly prosperous Jewish community lived in this area during the 4th and 5th centuries.

Little remains of Baram's second, smaller synagogue apart from an inscribed lintel, which is now on display at the Louvre in Paris.

Bar'am National Park also contains the ruins of the Maronite village of Biram and a church that is still used by the small Maronite community.

**Bat Ya'ar** בת יער בת יער  
Beautifully located in the Biryra forest, 5km from Tsfat, this is a popular **ranch** (☎ 04-692 1788; www.batyaar.co.il) with a real Western atmosphere. Kids will have a field day deciding whether to try outdoor 10-pin bowling, the rope adventure park or pony rides. Jeep tours and trail rides in the forest can also be arranged. The steak restaurant gets excellent reviews from locals. You need a car to get here; from Tsfat take the road northeast to Amuka.

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