

The Building Projects of King Herod the Great 30 BC to 2 BC

THE DEAD SEA AREA

Masada

Built between 37 and 31 BCE, Herod built Masada as a refuge from his enemies. Sitting 1300 feet above sea level, Herod chose this natural horst plateau, once occupied by the Hasmonean king Alexander Jannaeus to build his home away from home. Remains of the majestic Masada, with its vast array of water cisterns, storerooms, palaces, soldiers' quarters, bathhouses and the magnificent Northern three-tiered palace that was once carved into the massive bedrock can still be explored. After the Second Temple was destroyed in 70 CE, a community of Jews fled to Masada. For three years they lived in Herod's old palaces, built a synagogue and ritual baths and survived a months-long siege by the Roman army's illustrious 10th legion. In the end, however, the 966 Jewish residents of Masada opted for a mass suicide rather than succumb to Roman slavery.

Jericho

Jericho was home to a Hasmonean fortress. It was expanded by King Herod. The expansive water system that filled the swimming pool that was the sight of the dramatic assassination of the high priest Aristobulus III I can be seen today, as well as ancient mosaics near the sunken gardens.

JERUSALEM AND THE SURROUNDING AREA

Herodium National Park

Just 10 miles south of Jerusalem and even closer to Bethlehem, King Herod built the Herodium fortress after his victory against the Parthians. This unique site is the only Herodian complex that was built in a spot that prior to construction was completely desolate. Masada had once been occupied by the Hasmoneans. Caesarea had once been a Phoenician port, and Jerusalem had already been the Jewish capital for 1,000 years when Herod expanded the Temple mount. But Herodium was pure landscape. At the base of the fortress called Herodium lie the remains of an ancient country club where Mark Antony as well as Herod's other royal guests were treated to lavish pool parties complete with musical entertainment and the best imported wine served pool side. Because this was Herod's favorite spot and commanded an uninterrupted view of his beloved Jerusalem, he demanded to be buried on this magnificent site. In 2007, Ehud Netzer discovered Herod's tomb after 40 years of searching.

The Western Wall and The Temple Mount

King Herod's most famous building project was the expansion of the Temple Mount in which he expanded the Temple and more than doubled the size of the Temple Mount area. Then, to insure the physical security safety of this holiest of sites, he planned a retaining wall. The western side of this wall, known in Hebrew as *The Kotel*, or the Western Wall, is the holiest site in Judaism today. Today, the Western Wall has 28 layers above ground and another 17 layers remain underground! Built of limestone quarried from the nearby Zedekiah's Cave situated just outside the Muslim Quarter, the stones at eye-level represent the typical Herodian design with beautifully chiseled edges. But gazing upwards, one will see the later additions to the wall built by Umayyad Muslims and later still, by the Ottomans.

Tomb of the Patriarchs

The city of Hebron is most notable for the Cave of Machpelah, which is the traditional burial site of biblical Patriarchs and Matriarchs: Abraham and his wife Sarah, their son Isaac and grandson Jacob, and their wives Rebecca and Leah, as well as Jacob's son Joseph. (Gen. 23:17-20). The massive edifice built over the cave was constructed by Herod the Great. The thick walls, built of massive stone blocks with the characteristic recessed margins, are nearly fifty feet high. Herod sought to curry Jewish favor.

THE COAST

Caesarea

Despite his thirst for power, no one knew how to say "thank-you" better than Herod. Herod would show his gratitude by building fortresses in honor of Caesar Augustus, the Roman emperor who granted Herod the province of Judea to rule. But Herod realized that in order to impress the Romans they needed beauty was key. In 22 BCE, one year after his workers started building the Herodion Fortress, Herod embarked on one of his most ambitious building projects, Caesarea. He enlarged the natural port at what was formerly called Stratton's Tower, renamed it Caesarea in honor of the emperor and create a harbor to rival the magnificent port of Alexandria. Located on the coast one hour north of Tel Aviv, Caesarea is home to a Roman-era amphitheater which even today offer some of the best acoustics. An impressive Hippodrome once that welcomed 10,000 spectators to the fight-to-the death lion tamers and chariot races, is reminiscent of the nail-biting portrayal of a charioteer in the famous movie, Ben Hur.

SAMARIA

Sebastiya National Park

Located in Samaria, the capital in the ancient northern Kingdom of Israel, Sebaste National Park is located about seven and a half miles north of Nablus. The Old Testament site of Samaria is mentioned 109 times in the Bible. It was founded by Omri (ruled 885–874 BC) and served as the capital of Northern Israel. Like most of other Herod buildings Sebaste was originally built by Ahab, the son of Omri and husband of Jezbeel. The Assyrians captured in in 722 B.C and ended the Northern Kingdom. The Roman Emperor Augustus gave the city of Sebaste to Herod and he then rebuilt it in typically grand Herod style complete with an impressive, kilometer long cardo containing 600 columns to an impressive gate. He also built a forum, a Roman basilica, stadium, temple, hippodrome, houses, storehouses and a theater surrounded by a wall and gates. Herod built the theater and stadium in honor of Augustus Caesar.

THE NORTH

Banias National Park

Banias National Park, located in the Golan Heights is one of the favorite spots in Israel for tourists and natives alike. The Greek king Antiochus III won an important battle here and, as a result, a Greek Temple dedicated to the god Pan (Pan = Ban and is how Banias got its name) was built. But Herod chose this spot as the perfect place to erect a temple in honor of his patron Augustus Caesar. Not long after his death, it was here that Simon Peter declared that, "You are the Christ, the son of the living God." Jesus said, "Upon this is rock I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not prevail (Matt. 16:16-19).