

Why It Was Important We Visited This One Place In Israel



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Cave of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs, Hebron
PHOTO CREDIT: SHAIKACHLON / SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

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Working with a private Israel tour operator, Israel My Way, my husband and I were able to create a personalized trip with a cross-section of places to experience throughout Israel. Returning to places like Jerusalem's Western Wall and the Shuk, we automatically added the mystical city of Tzfat (also known as Safed) and the Makhtesh Ramon in the Negev to our list. We also requested places that were not included on previous tours. We were looking to increase our understanding of Jewish history, Israeli culture, and current events. Thus, Hebron, one of the four holiest cities in Israel, was added to our itinerary.

Anyone who is considering travel to Israel should realize that the country has a plethora of historical

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sites. With a limited number of days to explore, it is important to narrow down your list to include what you want to see. To maximize one's ability to see as much as possible, people usually stay in one or more places and select places to visit within approximately an hour of their accommodations. Since Hebron is about an hour from Jerusalem, it is a great choice for a day trip.

Note: Our visit to Hebron was part of a partially hosted, 12-day private [Israel My Way](#) tour. All opinions are my own.



The stairs leading to the Tomb of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs with King Herod's structure on top of the burial caves.
PHOTO CREDIT: SANDY BORNSTEIN

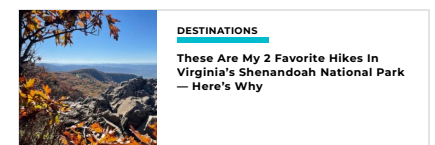
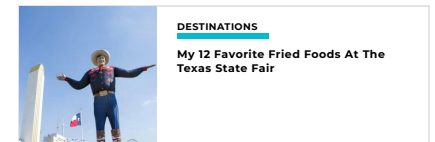
Historic Overview Of Hebron

On our second day in Jerusalem, our tour guide, Eric Tomer, drove us to Hebron, an ancient city mentioned in the Bible dozens of times. Abraham lived in this city and later purchased land for a burial cave for his wife Sarah. Subsequently, the matriarchs and patriarchs, except for Rachael, were buried in a cave frequently referred to as the Cave of Machpelah (Cave of the Couples), or the Tomb of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs. Jewish mystical texts state that Adam and Eve were laid to rest near the entrance of the Garden of Eden in the same city.

For a few years in the 11th century BCE, King David used Hebron as his capital city. During the reign of King Herod in the 1st century CE, a large, rectangular building was constructed on top of the caves to honor this holy resting place. The exterior architecture is similar in design to the Western Wall, which was built during the same era.

At various points in time, the original structure was modified by Christian and Muslim authorities. Churches and mosques were added. The Muslims changed the appearance of the building by adding minarets to the exterior. From 1267–1967, the Muslims prevented Jews and Christians from entering the building. Their visits to this holy site were limited to the seventh step on the eastern entrance.

After the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, historical records reveal that Jews frequently



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traveled to this historical place and also resided in the city. In 1929, Arabs went house to house murdering and raping Jewish residents and destroying buildings in the Jewish Quarter. The British did not intervene and chose to evict the Jewish survivors as well as other Jews who tried to live in Hebron in the 1930s. When Israel became a state in 1948, Jordan took control of Hebron. For almost 40 years, Jews were prohibited from coming to the city.

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They were able to finally return to the city after the 1967 Six-Day War. Efforts were made to restore Jewish historical sites and to re-establish a Jewish community in Hebron. An adjacent community called Kiryat Arba was also created.

The 1995 Oslo Agreement and 1997 Hebron Agreement resulted in a divided city. Today, most of Hebron, designated as *H1*, is governed by the Palestinian Authority. The remainder, designated as *H2*, is set aside for Jewish residents and historic sites. Both *H1* and *H2* are part of Israel.

Entering Hebron

On our way to Judea and Samaria, often referred to as the West Bank, we viewed many observation towers and tall security fences. We turned onto a road with a sign pointing to "The Jewish Neighborhoods of Hebron." Shortly thereafter, we were joined by Saadia, a former New York Jew who lives with his family in Kiryat Arba.

We stopped at a few security checkpoints manned by armed Israel Defense Force soldiers and passed by security cameras at just about every intersection. Saadia candidly discussed his religious passion to live and raise his young children in a place filled with biblical history. Hearing his narrative helped us understand the perspective of the small number of primarily religious Jews who have chosen to live in Hebron.



Entrance to Abraham and Sarah's room inside the Tomb of the Patriarchs
PHOTO CREDIT: SANDY BORNSTEIN

The Cave Of Machpelah

History lovers and individuals who appreciate the significance of the Bible will add the [Cave of Machpelah](#) to their must-see list. After the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, it is the second holiest place for the Jewish people. The cave also has the distinction of being the oldest Jewish site. Observant Muslims also consider it a holy place and refer to it as The Sanctuary of Abraham, while Christians embrace the site's historic significance.

From the parking lot, we walked up a series of stairs. I was immediately impressed by King Herod's contribution to society, built centuries ago. Unlike other structures that are no longer fully intact, this building remains a stellar example of 1st-century-CE architecture.

The interior is divided between a small Jewish section and a larger Muslim side, with two separate

entrances. The ability to see both the Jewish and Muslim sides is limited to 10 days per year for each religion. The Jewish side includes sanctuaries, study areas with bookshelves, and partitioned rooms for the patriarchs and matriarchs. Iron gates prevent entry into the underground tombs.



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As Ira and I moved from one room to the next, we both experienced an intangible feeling of tranquility, similar to what we feel when standing before the more crowded Western Wall in the Old City of Jerusalem.



Inside the Avraham Avinu Synagogue in the Old Jewish Quarter in Hebron, Israel
PHOTO CREDIT: IRA BORNSTEIN

The Avraham Avinu Synagogue

When I stepped into the [Avraham Avinu Synagogue](#), I was transported back to the post-Spanish Inquisition period, when Spanish Jews migrated to the Land of Israel in the 15th and 16th centuries. In 1540, the Jews who had settled in Hebron built the Avraham Avinu Synagogue. Over time, it became a focal point for the Hebron Sephardic community.

During the 1929 pogrom, the synagogue was desecrated. Survivors of the massacre rescued the ancient Torah scrolls and relocated their community to Jerusalem. When the Jordanians occupied Hebron from 1948–1967, they destroyed this synagogue, which had existed for hundreds of years, and replaced it with a sheep pen and public latrine.

When efforts were made to restore the Jewish sites in Hebron in the 1980s, the Israeli government authorized the excavation of this site along with the rebuilding of the synagogue. Some of the original pillars were preserved up to 3.5 meters (11.5 feet) and were included in the modern structure. A few years later, parts of the surrounding Jewish Quarter were rebuilt.

The ark was locked during our visit, so it was not possible to look closely at the ancient Torah scrolls that were returned to Hebron. The ability to rebuild a temporarily lost community stands as a strong testament to the Jews who worked together to preserve a prominent city from biblical times.



Entrance to Beit Hadassah and Hebron Visitor Center and Museum
PHOTO CREDIT: SANDY BORNSTEIN

The Hebron Visitor Center And Museum In The Beit Hadassah Building

The clinic called Chessed L'Avraham was built in 1893 to provide care for the Hebron people and offered free medical services for the indigent. In the early part of the 20th century, it became affiliated with the Hadassah Women's Zionist Organization and continued to offer free services to both Jews and Arabs. This medical building was looted and burned during the 1929 pogrom.

In 1979, a group of women and children chose to surreptitiously occupy the vacant Beit Hadassah. They then lived under extremely harsh conditions for over a year. The government of Israel finally agreed to re-establish a Jewish community and renovate nearby historic buildings after Arab terrorists murdered a handful of Yeshiva students outside the building. A [museum](#) was created in the lower level to preserve the history of Hebron and to dispel misconceptions. False narratives of Jewish history are frequently caused by ignorance and anti-Semitism.

Our walk through the museum helped us better understand what Saadia had shared about Hebron's history. A timeline pinpoints important dates and interactive displays provide insight into how Hebron's Jews lived from the 16th century until the 1929 pogroms. We also viewed relics from the Tel Hebron excavations. One room uses photographs, artifacts, and facts to retell the story of the 1929 pogrom.



Archeological ruins underneath Beit Menachem apartment building in Hebron, Israel
PHOTO CREDIT: IRA BORNSTEIN

Beit Menachem And The Tel Hebron Excavation

Under the support beams of the Beit Menachem apartment building built in the 1980s lies the archeological ruins of a four-room Israeli house dating back 4,000 years, along with columns from less than 3,000 years ago. During excavations, a king's seal and remnants from a wine press and distillery were uncovered.

Before visiting one of Saadia's American friends, who resides in the building, we walked up several floors to the observation deck where we could appreciate the total size of Hebron. Since we spent a considerable amount of time learning about everyday life in Hebron — while conversing with Saadia, Ben, and his wife — time did not permit a visit to the nearby [Tel Hebron Archeological Park](#), which has archeological ruins from the time of the patriarchs and matriarchs. Archeological sites throughout Israel substantiate different points in Ancient Israel's history.

Pro Tip

A day trip to Hebron can be combined with a visit to the [Gush Etzion Heritage Center](#). Inside the building, visitors can watch a powerful reenactment of the final days of Kfar Etzion in 1948. Two popular hikes are also accessible at this location.

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