



Upper Galilee & Golan

הגליל העליון רמת הגולן الجليل الاولى هضبة الجولان

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Why Go?

The rolling, green hills of the Upper Galilee (the area north of Rte 85) and the wild plateaus and peaks of the Golan Heights offer an incredible variety of activities to challenge the body and the soul and to nourish the stomach and the mind. Domestic tourists flock to the area – some are looking for luxurious tzimmerim (B&Bs), boutique wineries and gourmet country restaurants, while others come in search of superb hiking, cycling and horse riding, white-water rafting and even skiing. The region has still more attractions, including dazzling carpets of spring wildflowers, some of the world's best birdwatching and the spiritual charms of Tsfat, the most important centre of Kabbalah (Jewish mysticism) for over five centuries. The entire region, its summits refreshingly cool in summer, is just a short drive from the Christian sites and refreshing beaches of the Sea of Galilee.

Best Places to Eat

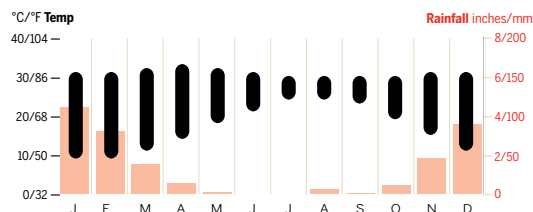
- ➔ Dag Al HaDan (p240)
- ➔ HaAri 8 (p230)
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Best Places to Stay

- ➔ Villa Tehila (p235)
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When to Go

Tzfat



Dec–Mar Skiing on Mt Hermon – if there's enough snow.

Feb–Aug Spring flowers bloom earliest in the Hula Valley, latest on Mt Hermon.

late Mar–Oct Adventure kayaking and rafting on the Jordan River.

Getting There & Around

The best way to explore the region is by car – distances are relatively short and the buses to many lovely villages and nature reserves run just a few times a day. There's a rental agency in Kiryat Shmona (Eldan) but you'll probably be better off hiring a vehicle in Tiberias, Haifa, Tel Aviv or Jerusalem.

The main bus hub is Kiryat Shmona.

Although it's not recommended, many Israelis hitchhike their way around, especially on the Golan.

THE UPPER GALILEE

Tsfat (Safed)

צפת ספד

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The mountaintop city of Tsfat is an ethereal place to get lost for a day or two. A centre of Kabbalah (Jewish mysticism) since the 16th century, it's home to an otherworldly mixture of Hasidic Jews, artists and devout-but-mellow former hippies, a surprising number of them American immigrants.

In the old city's labyrinth of cobbled alleys and steep stone stairways, you'll come across ancient synagogues, crumbling stone houses with turquoise doorways, art galleries, artists' studios and Yiddish-speaking little boys in black kaftans and bowler hats. Parts of Tsfat look like a *shtetl* (ghetto) built of Jerusalem stone, but the presence of so many mystics and spiritual seekers creates a distinctly bohemian atmosphere.

On Shabbat (Friday night and Saturday until sundown), commerce completely shuts down. While this may be inconvenient if you're looking for a bite to eat, the lack of traffic creates a meditative, spiritual atmosphere through which joyful Hasidic tunes waft from hidden synagogues and unseen dining rooms. Do not photograph observant Jews on Shabbat and holidays.

In July and August and during the Passover and Sukkot holidays, Tsfat is packed with tourists – both Israeli and foreign – and the city's restaurants and cafes buzz until late at night. Winter, on the other hand, is very quiet, giving the city's many artists a chance to get some work done.

History

Founded in the Roman period, Tsfat was fortified by Yosef ben Matityahu (later known as Josephus Flavius), commander of Jewish forces in the Galilee in the early years of the Great

Jewish Revolt (66–70 CE). According to the Jerusalem Talmud, Tsfat was the site of one of the hilltop fire beacons used to convey news of the sighting of the new moon in Jerusalem.

The Crusaders, led by King Fulk of Anjou, built a vast citadel here to control the highway to Damascus. It was later captured by Saladin (1188), dismantled by the Ayyubids (1220), rebuilt by the Knights Templar (1240) and expanded by the Mamluk Sultan Beybars (after 1266).

During the 15th and 16th centuries, Tsfat's Jewish community increased in size and importance thanks to an influx of Sephardic Jews expelled from Spain in 1492. Among the new arrivals were some of the Jewish world's pre-eminent Kabbalists. During this period, Tsfat was an important stop on the trade route from Akko to Damascus and was known for its production of textiles. A Hebrew printing press – the first such device anywhere in the Middle East – was set up in Tsfat in 1577.

In the late 1700s, Tsfat welcomed an influx of Hasidim from Russia.

Tsfat was decimated by the plague in 1742, 1812 and 1847, and devastated by earthquakes in 1759 and 1837. The latter disaster killed thousands and caused all but a handful of buildings to crumble.

In 1948 the departing British handed the town's strategic assets over to Arab forces, but after a pitched battle Jewish forces prevailed and the Arab population fled – among them, 13-year-old Mahmoud Abbas, now president of the Palestinian Authority. These days, Tsfat's residents include more than a few American Jews who turned to mysticism in a 1960s-inspired search for spirituality and transcendental meaning.

Sights

Central Tsfat's main thoroughfare, lined with shops and eateries, is north–south Yerushalayim St (Jerusalem St). West of here, a broad staircase called Ma'alot Olei HaGardom divides the Synagogue Quarter (to the north) from the Artists' Quarter (to the south). The main alley in the Synagogue Quarter, famous for its many art galleries, is called Alkabetz St and Beit Yosef St (Yosef Caro St). The Kabbalists' tombs are further down the slope.

Most of Tsfat's sights are in the Synagogue Quarter and the adjacent Artists' Quarter.

Synagogue Quarter

Tsfat's long-time Jewish neighbourhood spills down the hillside from HaMaginim Sq (Kikar HaMaginim; Defenders' Sq),