

THE JERUSALEM POST *Israel guide*

Carmel Caves - How to meet a caveman

By: AVIVA BAR-AM

Print | Save

[← Back to Israel Guide index](#)

In 1929, English archeologist Dorothy Garrod and an all-female team arrived at a site in the Carmel mountain range and began to dig deeply into its caves. According to an oft-told tale, one day Garrod sent a missive to her family back home announcing with great excitement that she had 'found man.'

Garrod's parents, who by that time had given up hope that their nearly 40-year-old daughter would ever marry, were beside themselves with joy. At the time they didn't realize that Garrod's 'man' was actually the skeleton of a Neanderthal woman - the first ever to be discovered outside of Europe.

Ten years after she began excavating the Carmel caves, Garrod became the first female professor at Cambridge. Perhaps she acquired the position in part because her findings in the Holy Land were so astounding. Indeed, before she left the Carmel she uncovered masses of evidence attesting to that rarest of phenomena: continuous settlement in a single location for 800,000 years.

For years, the public was free to roam through the excavated caves, but things changed after the site was taken over by the Nature Reserves Authority in 1988. Today visitors must pay a fee, but in return they are treated to fascinating displays, a clean cave to explore, and an educational movie. Although the latter, in my humble opinion, is one vast yawn, this is really a great family outing.

You will find the Carmel caves inside the Nahal Hame'arot Nature Reserve, located off Highway 4 between Zichron Ya'acov and Haifa. Turn at the sign you will see about eight kilometers north of the Fureidis Junction, then enter the site. By public transport, take bus 921 from Tel Aviv to Ein Carmel, from where there is a 2 km. walk.

ONE HUNDRED million years ago, our beautiful Carmel mountain range was only flat land covered by a shallow sea. Over time the waters receded and the ground rose up to form mountains. Sea creatures died and turned into fossils, sinking to the bottom of the ocean; eventually these fossils covered the landscape's natural limestone rock.

Little by little water dissolved the hills' soft stone, forming cracks in the rock that slowly widened into large caves. Eventually, the caves came to serve as shelter for early man.

You will want to begin by climbing up the steep hill that leads to the oldest and westernmost of the prehistoric caves. At the top of the steps there is a superb observation point, overlooking the whole area. Take special notice of a natural phenomenon called 'finger cliff' (matzok etzba). Long ago, the cliff and the cave were joined, and together they formed a gigantic underwater reef. Take a walk to the cliff and visit another interesting cave.



Tanur ('Oven') Cave, the first cave you encounter, was also the first in the area to be discovered. It happened in 1928, when the British were building a port in Haifa. Workers in need of large rocks for a breakwater took them from the Carmel. When they stumbled on prehistoric tools, experts were called and Garrod arrived soon afterwards. The cave's name comes from the chimney in its ceiling, formed by natural forces.

Life in this cave dates all the way back to the Acheulian culture on the Carmel, about a million years ago. The people living here apparently stood erect (called *Homo erectus*) and chiseled out hand tools which were comfortable to hold and symmetrical.

More tools appear as we follow the layers up with our eyes. For instance, the Mousterian culture, found only in this part of the world, used their hand tools for scraping pelts. About 25 to 50 people lived in this cave. They fed themselves by hunting the local animals of the time: deer, gazelles and wild cows. This is where Garrod discovered the Neanderthal skeleton, whose skull contained a brain the same size as that of modern man. However, the face lacked a chin and had a very low forehead.

Moving on, you will reach Camel Cave, where you can view a display of the Mousterian culture, which began about 100,000 years ago and lasted for 40,000 years. Mannequins dressed in period costumes illustrate life at the time. Hides are hung up to dry and Mr. Caveman is sharpening a tool. He could be making a spearhead, or a knife for hunting. Mrs. Caveman is shown raising the kids and gathering grapes and berries for meals. The couple's son is holding a snake.

Your next stop is Nahal Cave, 70 meters deep, where you have the opportunity to explore the interior and to watch the movie. Just inside the entrance is a rock with traces of a prehistoric animal, a cone-shaped creature which contained a mollusk. After the mollusk rotted, only the shell remained, which left its print on the rock. The animal became extinct together with the dinosaur 65 million years ago; this is one of the only places in the world where it can be seen so clearly and in such quantity.

Outside Nahal Cave you will find remains from the Natufians, the last prehistoric culture. During this time (about 12,000-10,000 BCE) lifestyles all over the world became more developed and here, too, humans began to settle down. They stopped hunting and began growing produce on terraced hills near the entrances to their caves. They tamed dogs, goats, and other wild animals, and developed interesting forms of art. (There is a path that leads directly to Nahal Cave, which is wheelchair-accessible, and is also good for those who have difficulty walking.)

With permanent settlement came burial in cemeteries, and 84 skeletons were found next to the entrance to the main cave. All were laid to rest in the fetal position - perhaps so that they would take up less space; it must have been hard to dig in the hill's hard rocks with primitive tools. Another explanation is that the fetal position may have indicated a belief in reincarnation. Perhaps prehistoric man felt that if the bodies were buried in the position they held before birth they would be reborn. Shell necklaces found around every skull are almost certainly evidence that the deceased were given a religious burial ceremony.

Although you can wander about on your own, I highly recommend the guided tours. On one of our visits, led by a guide, an eight-year-old Anglo-Israeli suddenly blurted out:

'Hey, Mom, this is darn interesting!'

Hours: From April to September 8 a.m.-5 p.m.; from October to March 8 a.m.-4 p.m. Friday and Saturday there are guided tours at 10 a.m., 12 noon and 2 p.m. at no extra charge.

Entrance fees: adults NIS 18, children NIS 8. Telephone: (04) 984-1750/2.

There are wheelchair-accessible restrooms. More information on national parks and nature reserves can be found online at: www.park.org.il.

(BOX) A museum underwater

For an interesting side trip, visit the Mizgaga. This fantastic museum of underwater and regional archeology is located about two kilometers north of Fureidis Junction, just inside Kibbutz Nahsholim on the shores of the Mediterranean. To get there by public transport, take bus 921 from Tel Aviv, or train to Binyamina and bus 202 from there, or train to Hof Hacarmel and bus 921 or 202.

Originally a glass factory built by the Baron Edmund de Rothschild so that settlers could produce bottles for local Jewish wine, the establishment was forced to close down after only two years of operation. As it turned out, the local sand produced an unattractive black glass: either the formula or the sand itself was defective.

The settlers' loss was our gain, for the building now houses a delightful museum for artifacts found at nearby ancient Dor. Also on display are fascinating artifacts taken from the sea. Among them are the cannon Napoleon threw into the water as he fled the Land of Israel in the 18th century, pottery dating back to the 14th century BCE, a beautiful collection of lamps, unusual pagan statues, and a statue of Buddha dating back to the time of the Phoenicians - the only one of its kind ever discovered in Israel.

My favorite exhibit illustrates the process by which the ancients produced purple and blue dye. Blue dye was used by the Israelites for curtains in the desert Tabernacle, garments worn by the high priest, and to color the fringes of their prayer shawls. Rich people and royalty, from the Minoans of ancient Crete (3000 BCE) to the wealthy of the late Byzantine era, colored their garments purple.

Workers produced the dye by crushing murex snails, commonly found in the sea. Murex snails have a hidden gland which discharges a yellow fluid with an unpleasant odor.

Once the fluid is exposed to the sun, however, the liquid turns blue or purple, depending on which of the three kinds of snails have been crushed. It is a miracle that there are any left today: It took 10,000 crushed snails to produce each gram of dye. Snail shells, a distinctive spiral shape, are part of the exhibit.

 Print |  Save

 [Back to Israel Guide index](#)

Hours: Sun.-Thur. 8:30 a.m.-2 p.m.; Fri. to 1:30 p.m.; Saturday 10:30 a.m.-3 p.m. Entrance: Adults NIS 15, Children NIS 8. Telephone: (04) 639-0950. Wheelchair accessible.