

THE JERUSALEM POST *Israel guide*

Rosh Pina - Historic Rosh Pina

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Introduction

Starvation, drought and disease quickly brought an end to the second rural Jewish settlement in Galilee, founded in 1878 on land bought from the Arabs of Jaouni village. (The first, established over 40 years earlier near Mount Meron, also ended in disaster.) By 1880, almost all of the settlers - originally from Safed - had gone back home.

David Shub represented a group of potential immigrants from Romania that wanted to farm in the Land of Israel. In 1882 he took a look at what remained of the settlement and liked what he found. After the group heard about its three springs, great climate and wonderful view they gave permission for him to purchase the land.

Soon afterwards, the Romanians reached Jaouni. Together with a number of Russian immigrants and a few of the original pioneers from Safed, they began clearing the rocks in preparation for farming.

Rosh Pina – the beginning

On December 12, 1882, after a long-delayed rainfall made it possible to begin planting, the pioneers proclaimed the establishment of their new community. They called it Rosh Pina, 'cornerstone,' taking the name from Psalms 117:22: 'The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.'

Yet despite the hopeful name and the group's enthusiasm, Rosh Pina was about to suffer the same calamities that befell the earlier settlers. Their bad luck began with a wedding, soon after the community was founded. Arabs from Safed, who had been helping to build the new settlement, were invited to attend the ceremony. It was their custom to fire rifles into the air at celebrations, and one of them apparently grabbed a settler's rifle. In the ensuing melee, the Arab was accidentally shot and killed.

Safed's Arab community headed straight for Rosh Pina, bent on revenge. The Jews were saved by the mukhtar (tribal head) of Jaouni, who took everyone into his home and told the angry Arabs that if they were going to murder people they would have to start with him!

In the end, the mukhtar negotiated a financial settlement between Safed Arabs and the settlers. As a result, the Rosh Pina farmers ended up with so little money that they could barely subsist. Disputes with local Beduin, who used the area's springs to water their flocks, added to the farmers' problems. Desperate, the settlers mortgaged their houses and their land.

And there were more difficulties to come. Relations between the Russians and Romanians were poor, the settlers knew nothing about farming, and their supporters back in Romania



seemed to have forgotten about them. By mid-1883 they were at the edge of despair. Salvation came at the end of the year, when Baron Edmond de Rothschild decided to lend a helping hand. Taking on all of the settlers' debts, the baron agreed to pay them a monthly stipend.

Still, Rosh Pina didn't become a viable community. The farmers' failure to reap good-quality wheat led them to try growing grapes for raisins. When that proved unsuccessful, they tried producing wine. When that didn't work out, they built a flour mill. When that failed, they grew mulberries and manufactured silk - a venture that ended badly.

Modern-Day Rosh Pina

Fortunately, with the addition of new immigrants in 1948, and especially following the Six Day War, Rosh Pina finally took off. Full of galleries, good restaurants, and lovingly preserved old buildings, Rosh Pina is, today, one of the most sought-after tourist spots in the country.

By now you must be champing impatiently at the bit, ready to begin your tour of Rosh Pina.



Beit Hapekidut (House of the Clerks)

TURN OFF Highway 90 into Rosh Pina and drive up the cobblestones on Rehov Hahalutzim. When you can go no further, turn left and park and continue down the street to lovely Beit Hapekidut (House of the Clerks). It is the second structure on the left.

Naturally enough, the clerks sent by Baron Rothschild to run Rosh Pina needed elegant living quarters and offices. After all, from Rosh Pina they ran the financial concerns of all the baron's settlements in Galilee! Beit Hapekidut houses a fascinating but over-long audiovisual program about early Rosh Pina. Hebrew viewing hours are: Fridays and Saturdays 11, 12 and 1. For English, call (04) 693-6913.

House of Dr. Gideon Mer

Next door, a second fancy abode was also meant for the baron's clerks. But they were long gone by 1929, when Dr. Gideon Mer moved in. Born in Russia in 1894, Mer abandoned his medical studies for a life of hard labor farming the Land of Israel. After serving with the Jewish Legion in the First World War, Mer returned to Israel and drained swamps. He then completed his medical degree and moved to Rosh Pina, where he began researching a cure for malaria, the bane of swamp dwellers.

Finding it difficult to find other volunteers, he began by experimenting on his family - and himself. Apparently, in his zeal to discover whether malaria would cause a miscarriage, he injected his pregnant wife with the disease! Fortunately, it did not - and the result was a bouncing baby boy. In 1934 Mer succeeded in bringing malaria under control. His discovery won world-wide acclaim, and the Doctor's House became a world-famous medical center.

Because there are offices in this building, it is open during the week for visitors. Explore the doctor's old workroom, still with the original furnishings. Can you see the mosquito cages with special sleeves? Mer's children would put their hands inside so that they could be bitten and catch malaria. Other attractions include bats and rats in formaldehyde.



House of Simha Haim Vilkomitch

Although Rosh Pina failed in so many areas, there was one in which the little community excelled: Hebrew education. Rosh Pina's school was the first in the world in which all of the subjects - including Hebrew - were taught in Hebrew. Turn the corner onto Rehov Harishonim (Founders' Street). The second house belonged to Simha Haim Vilkomitch, the principal of the settlement school. Vilkomitch, and teacher Yitzhak Epstein, set standards so outstanding that their school served as a model for teachers all over the country. It was also a cultural center, where the school put on operas and Shakespearean productions. Currently, it houses an art gallery and shop.

During a shmita year such as this one, Jewish law requires farmers to let their fields lie fallow. This results in a severe loss of livelihood and, as a result, the issue recently made it all the way to the Supreme Court. But the topic is not new: nearly a century ago Chief Rabbi Kook and his contemporaries held a heated debate on the subject in Rosh Pina, at the Alter Schwartz Hotel across the street. Alter Schwartz, whose hotel was the first in Galilee, was the grandfather of famous soldier/politician Yigal Allon.

Beautiful synagogue

The beautiful synagogue on your left was the first public building erected in Rosh Pina. Feast your eyes on the amazing ceiling - the heavens filled with fluffy clouds. Each corner has a theme, from palm trees to musical instruments played in the Temple. Two stalwart lions guard the Holy Ark.

House of Yosef Friedman

Yosef Friedman owned the house next door. A successful farmer who grew etrogim and mandarin oranges in his garden, he spoke fluent Arabic and was the liaison between the local Arabs, the settlers, the baron's clerks and the Turkish government. The Turkish sultan honored him with the title 'Effendi,' so his home is called House of the Effendi. Turn right, and right again at the 'Boulevard' - today the parking lot where your vehicle awaits your eventual return. Now, however, descend steps between the Doctor's House and Beit Hapekidut. When you reach a sign pointing to restaurants in opposite directions, turn right on the balcony and walk to the cave of Shlomo Ben-Yosef.

In the late 1930s, Arabs murdered hundreds of Palestine's Jews. Over one two-week period in 1938 they massacred nine people - including a child and two women - in Galilee. Polish-born Shlomo Ben-Yosef was a fervent Zionist who joined the right-wing Betar movement in Rosh Pina. Fed up with the Jewish Establishment's policy of restraint, Ben-Yosef and two comrades decided to take revenge by themselves. On April 4, 1938, during an unsuccessful attempt to make an Arab bus tumble into a wadi, they were spotted by the British and took shelter in this cave.

A Jewish policeman tried unsuccessfully to persuade them to remain hidden. But Ben-Yosef emerged, declaring that he had cowered in Poland and refused to do so in the Land of Israel. He was hanged in Acre prison. He was buried in the cemetery spread out on the slopes directly across from you.

Gan Habaron

Return to the steps, and descend through Gan Habaron, planted in 1884 and meant to look something like the famous garden in Versailles, France. Exit onto the main road. Then cross the street. On the corner stands Villa Tehilla, a guest house originally built by two of Rosh Pina's founders in 1885 (see below).

Descend the road past the complex to reach the Be'eri Observation Point for a fabulous view of the entire area. Then return to the main street and turn left. On your right is the historic old school, in imminent danger of wanton destruction. Follow the cobblestones and make a sharp right. The cemetery is on your left.

The road begins a gradual but slightly rocky ascent into the Rosh Pina Riverbed. Scattered among the lovely olive on both sides of the wadi are almond trees that used to flower gloriously each spring. Today they are completely black: burnt to a crisp by rockets during the Second Lebanon War. After hiking for 30 minutes, a green trail marker points right. Turn, and immediately climb a short but steep slope to see flowering sternbergias (helmoniyot). Especially appealing because they appear in November when other flowers have yet to blossom, sternbergia blooms resemble large bells, have no leaves, and burst full-blown out of the ground. They last only a few weeks, so come now, before they disappear! (See box on sternbergias, right.)

To return, walk back the way you came. Across from the cemetery you will see a flight of stairs and a sign leading up to the early houses - and your vehicle.

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