

## Machtsh Ramon Israel's "Grand Canyon"

By Peter Abelow

Photos: Jack Hazut/IsraelImage

Israel's Machtsh Ramon is the largest machtsh in the world.

**A** what? A spectacular *machtsh*? To the uninformed, a *machtsh* looks like a crater or a canyon but it is neither. Geologically speaking, it is a valley which has been eroded by rivers, and surrounded by steep walls of hard rocks at the top and brittle rocks at the bottom. The result is a magnificent array of ancient geological layers and multi-colored rocks. There are only a few *machtshim* (lit. translated as mortar) in the world and they are all found in Israel, including the largest one, Machtsh Ramon. (It is approximately 24 miles long and ranges from one to six miles wide.)

The Negev, which makes up the

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southern portion of Israel, comprises two-thirds of the country. Despite the barrenness of the Negev, for many, an excursion on Route 40, heading south from Be'ersheva, is filled with wonder and adventure. Even the unimpressed, however, cannot help but be astounded by the sudden appearance, on the right side of the road, of the flourishing town of Mitzpeh Ramon. (*Mitzpeh* means overlook.) Enter the town and follow the signs towards the Visitor's Center for your first view of the spectacular Machtsh Ramon. Just beyond the town is the canyon.

There are many ways to appreciate the Machtsh Ramon Nature Reserve and lots of things to do. The Visitor's Center is the place to begin as it offers an expansive view of the entire area as well as extensive explanatory displays of the region's geological history. Additionally, there is a film about the

ecology of the desert, viewable in English or Hebrew. The National Park Service representatives will be happy to help you plan your visit to the Machtsh, based on your time availability as well as the ages of the people in your group. If you only have time for one activity in Machtsh Ramon, follow Route 40 as it descends along the walls of the canyon to the "Carpentry Shop," which is roughly five kilometers from the town. There, a 15-minute, circular hike takes you through a rather unusual and fascinating section where natural rock has been crystallized (by the intense heat of long-extinct volcanoes) into formations that resemble the lumber scattered around the floor of a carpentry shop. At the beginning of the trail, you will be asked to stay on the boardwalk and only touch the rocks which are in a special display case.

A bit further into the Machtsh is the turnoff to the Be'erot Campgrounds and the Saharonim Spring. This area served as a way station for the Nabateans during the second and first centuries, BCE. These desert nomads were masters of the spice routes from the Far East, traveling through the Arabian desert and the Negev to Gaza and other ports on the Mediterranean. It took three months for the long camel caravans to traverse thousands of miles. Their route crossed through the Machtsh and near Saharonim Spring, a natural spring. (Yes, the spring still gives forth water and I always picture Bnei Yisrael looking for oases just like this one during their 40-year journey through the desert.) You can even visit the remains of one of the Nabateans' overnight "motels" in the desert. There are those who suggest that some of the ingredients for the incense offered in the Second Temple were provided by merchants who obtained their goods from these same

Nabateans.

For the more adventurous, there are a number of hikes of varying lengths and levels of difficulty in the Machtsh. Information can be obtained at the Visitor's Center. Popular destinations which are "off the beaten track" can be reached by off-road jeep. A number of companies offer guided tours of the reserve, ranging from two to four hours. These trips must be booked in advance, either through your travel provider or at the reception desk of the Ramon Inn, Mitzpeh Ramon's charming (and only) hotel.

Another exciting recreation is rappelling down the side of the cliffs of the Machtsh. This is not for the fainthearted but children as young as eight can experience the exhilaration of this activity at the hands of trained and licensed professionals. The rappelling site is next to the Visitor's Center and advance reservations can be made at the hotel.

Children will love a visit to the Alpaca Farm, located just a few miles

west of Mitzpeh Ramon. Unusual animals imported from the Far East and the Andes of Central America, alpacas will enthrall you with their antics as you stroll among them. Enjoy feeding them, and their cousins the llamas, as well as the camel rides offered at the attraction. Older children as well as adults might also enjoy desert archery which is located on the road to the Alpaca Farm. This activity also requires advance reservation.

The Ramon region is the place to visit in the winter months when the temperature in the Negev is ideal. If you are driving to Eilat, consider traveling via the Negev. Stop overnight at the Ramon Inn to take advantage of all that the region has to offer. Or, spend a few days there, with Mitzpeh Ramon as your base. Other nearby sites are Sde Boker (home of David Ben Gurion), Avdat (remains of a Nabatean and subsequent Byzantine city) and the canyon of Ein Avdat, all within 30 minutes of Mitzpeh Ramon. **JA**