

A CASTLE ON THE CLIFFS The Nimrod Fortress

By Peter Abelow

The Nimrod Fortress, the largest fortress in the country, measures over 1,200 feet long and between 200 and 450 feet wide.

Photos: Peter Abelow

One of the most spectacular drives in Israel is the descent from the Druze village of Masada in the northern Golan Heights (not to be confused with the Herodian fortress along the Dead Sea) to the Etzba HaGalil—the finger of the Galil that protrudes north to Kiryat Shmona and Metulla. The road initially winds through natural forests along the slopes of Israel's highest peak, Mount Hermon, and then suddenly gives way to magnificent vistas of the valley, hundreds of feet below. For much of the spring, and sometimes even in early summer,

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snow can still be seen on the higher elevations of Mount Hermon, to the northeast. The valley below is green all year, thanks to the abundant water of the Dan and Banias springs.

And then suddenly, a traveler's eye will begin to discern the outline of a massive stone edifice on top of one of the hills in the distance, to the north of the road. At first it is difficult to see because the structure blends into the background. But, as the road continues its descent, the Nimrod Fortress begins to emerge, and within a few moments it is clearly in view, standing out against the backdrop of the blue Israeli sky.

The Fortress is named after the mighty warrior of the Bible, but it most certainly was not built by Nimrod. Most researchers believe it was built in the twelfth century by Muslims who wanted to



protect the road to Damascus against the invading Crusaders. Others posit that it was built by the Crusaders. All agree that it changed hands a number of times in the thirteenth century but that it eventually remained under Muslim control, as attested to by Arabic inscriptions in the gate tower. One inscription is from 1230; the other is from 1275 and states that Baibars, the Mamluk sultan, restored the tower. The fortress commands a strategic view of the ancient town of Banias, near the spring. Banias, which was an important regional center in the Middle Ages, is located only three miles from the fortress.

Nimrod was the son of Noah's grandson, Cush. The Torah calls Nimrod "the first to amass power in the world" (Bereishit 10: 8-9). And the Gemara, in *Avodah Zarah* 53b, goes further and ascribes the Tower of Babel to Nimrod (see Rashi on the words "*beit Nimrod*"). It is no wonder that locals called this massive fortress, the largest in the country, by his name. But this appellation seems to be fairly recent. Originally, the Nimrod Fortress was called Kalat al-Subeiba, which in Arabic means Castle of the Large Cliff.

Today, visitors to the region can explore the excavated and restored portions of the fortress. The fortress measures over 1,200 feet long (that's the length of four football fields!) and between 200 and 450 feet wide. The entrance is from the east, and the first section contains "secret passages"—winding stair-

cases and underground water cisterns with some of the original plaster still visible. Throughout the fortress, there are many examples of "loopholes"—special windows that are narrow on the outside but wide on the inside. They were designed specifically for shooting bows and arrows or crossbows, giving the defender inside the fortress plenty of room but the attacker only a narrow slit as a target. The central section, which is accessible by a path within the fortress, contains the remains of a "dungeon" surrounded by large rectangular towers. In the western section, there are the remains of a fortress within a fortress, which was protected by its own moat and drawbridge. It is worth climbing to the top of one of the towers and walking to the western end of the fortress; the scenery is exhilarating, and the views are breathtaking.

The Israeli National Parks Service maintains the site, and visitors can obtain a site map and suggested touring routes at the entrance booth.

The park entrance is located on Route 989 between Kiryat Shmona and Mount Hermon, about thirty minutes east of Kiryat Shmona. Children love to climb and explore the many secrets of the fortress. The spectacular views, in every direction, will keep your cameras busy and constantly remind you of the beauty of "*Eretz hatova asher natan lach*, the good Land that God has given you" (Devarim 8:10). **IA**



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