



Bygone Spa

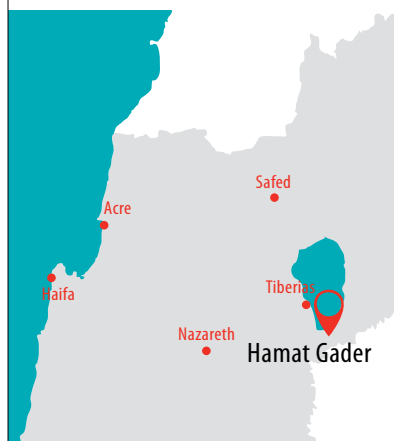
From ancient geological wonder to crocodile spa, Hamat Gader has gone through many incarnations and as many hands. Despite its pagan statues, its hot springs drew even the Talmudic sages // [Tamar Hayardeni](#)



Where To?

Hamat Gader

Historic baths and synagogue from the late Roman period



I

srael is fortunate enough to sit safely on the western edge of the Syrian-African

Rift. The rift valley's eastern side is still drifting north, centimeter by centimeter, such that in a few centuries (or perhaps millennia), the Arab-Israeli conflict will be resolved by the forces of nature alone, as the Syrians find themselves parked in Asia Minor with the Turks rather than in Israel's backyard. Meanwhile, we can enjoy the rift's fringe benefits along the Jordan Valley: the three liquid jewels of the Dead Sea, the Sea of Galilee (the only one of them that's potable), and beautiful little Hamat Gader.

Southeast of the Sea of Galilee and the banks of the Yarmuk River, the rift runs so deep that boiling mineral water from an aquifer two kilometers underground spurts joyfully upward. Brimming with sulfur, magnesium, and potassium – plus a couple of radioactive isotopes of radium and radon – it offers a bubbling natural experience for lovers of the extreme.

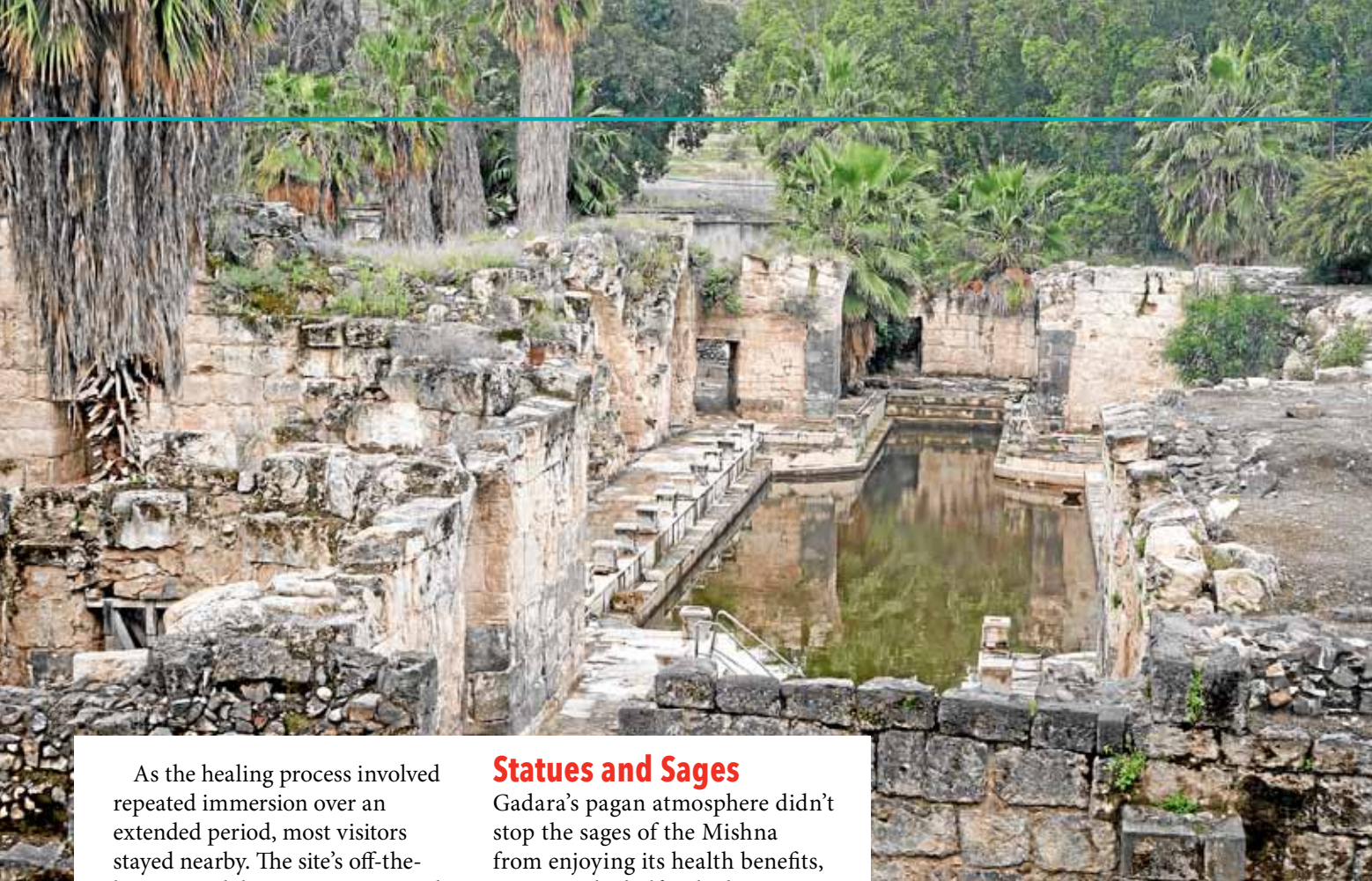
Levantine Hot Spot

The Romans, always on the lookout for a luxurious bath, were the

first to harness the water's healing properties some two millennia ago. Hearing of the seething pothole in the southern Golan Heights – near the Hellenist town of Gadara, long known as Hamat (meaning “Warm”; see Joshua 19:35) for its hot springs – they soon located the sources of four such springs and one cold, clear one.

The place was prompted equipped with all the amenities of a well-appointed Roman spa complex – caldarium, tepidarium, frigidarium, etc. Sprawling over five hundred square meters and tastefully decorated with statues, marble pillars, and fountains, it had wading pools set around the largest hot spring of all, Ain el-Maqle.

Reeking of sulphur, this spring could cook you at 52° Celsius (126° Fahrenheit); hence its nicknames: “the Frying Pan” and “Hell.” Like any standard spa, the Roman baths in Hamat Gader boasted several pools, in which cold water was carefully added to hot to reach different temperatures. Each of the seven pools was located in its own hall, and visitors traded tips about which pool cured what ailment. There was even a pool reserved for lepers.



As the healing process involved repeated immersion over an extended period, most visitors stayed nearby. The site's off-the-beaten-track location necessitated fine dining and entertainment to stave off boredom, and the Romans made the place a Middle Eastern mini-Las Vegas. It had ample guesthouses, a theater seating two thousand, as well as a pagan temple where sacrifices and incense could be offered to bolster the mineral waters' effect.

A Roman inscription on the premises honors Emperor Antoninus Pius (138–161 CE), who evidently contributed generously to their development. His investment paid off: Hamat Gader's fame spread far and wide. As the fourth-century Greek historian Eunapius enthused:

Gadara, a place which has warm baths in Syria, inferior only to those at Baiae in Italy, with which no other baths can be compared. (Eunapius, *Lives of the Philosophers and Sophists*, Loeb Classical Library, vol. 134 [1921], p. 369)

Statues and Sages

Gadara's pagan atmosphere didn't stop the sages of the Mishna from enjoying its health benefits, ignoring the half-naked Roman statues gazing down on them. The rabbinic literature of the period mentions Hamat Gader dozens of times. Scholars patronized its inns, and Rabbi Hama bar Hanina even noted the size and flavor of the miniature eggs he and his colleague were served for breakfast (Jerusalem Talmud, *Terumot* 2:1). Rabbi Yehuda Ha-nasi, editor of the Mishna, was a frequent visitor (ibid., *Shabbat* 4:2), and some sages even permitted bathing there on the Sabbath (Babylonian Talmud, *Shabbat* 109a).

The baths were apparently so inspiring that many halakhic rulings originated there. For instance, Rabbi Yehuda Nesiya, grandson of Rabbi Yehuda Ha-nasi, determined during one of his stays that the child of a Jewish woman fathered by a slave or a non-Jew isn't a mamzer (outcast) (Jerusalem Talmud, *Kiddushin* 3:12).

Health farm with a cultured Latin air.
Remains of the Roman spa and pools in
Hamat Gader
Photo: Mboesch

Even the Romans had heard of the seething pothole in the southern Golan Heights, long known as Hamat for its warm waters



By the By

- According to the 1949 cease-fire between Israel and Syria, Hamat Gader was to be a demilitarized Israeli enclave inside Syria. Yet the Syrians allowed no Israeli presence. On April 4, 1951, after Syrian plainclothes soldiers occupied the site, Israel demonstrated its sovereignty by sending in armed forces dressed as policemen. The Syrians responded with massive artillery fire, killing seven Israeli soldiers. Two more were captured but returned shortly afterward. Israel retaliated by bombing the area, but Syria retained control of Hamat Gader until 1967. A memorial to the seven casualties, Yad La-shiva (Memorial to the Seven), is located two hundred meters east of Hamat Gader Junction.
- Hamat Gader's famous crocodile farm opened in 1981 in the hope of attracting more holidaymakers to this somewhat remote resort in the Golan. The original Floridian alligators were soon supplemented by African river crocodiles and South American caimans. Another two Indian species joined the club somewhat later. All the crocs are well contained by a fence surrounding pools and lawns, over which a bridge allows safe viewing by anyone with an overdeveloped affection for long rows of sharp, pointy teeth.

An Israeli archaeologist examines a mosaic after Hamat Gader reverts to Israeli rule in the Six-Day War

Photo: Ilan Brauner, National Photo Collection, Israel State Archive

Today hot springs just aren't enough to draw a crowd. Member of Hamat Gader's toothy entertainment team
Photo: Staselnik



The poolside contact between Jews and non-Jews raised no few issues, as in the unfortunate case of Rabbi Ami, who pricked his finger while visiting Hamat Gader with Rabbi Yehuda Nesiya and required immediate medical attention, resulting in a discussion of the permissibility of treatment by a non-Jewish doctor (*ibid.*, *Avoda Zara* 2:2). On another jaunt to Gadara, the pair borrowed silver dishes from some Romans and wondered if they had to be purified in a mikveh prior to use by Jews (*ibid.* 5:15).

Hamat Gader's wealthy Jewish clientele evidently warranted the erection of a generously proportioned prayer house, extended in the fourth century into an enormous, elaborate synagogue complete with mosaic floors dedicated in Aramaic (as opposed to Latin or Greek) to kind donors from Zippori (Sepphoris), Kfar Akaviya (just east of the Sea



of Galilee), Capernaum, Tiberias, Arbel, and even Gadara itself. The main inscription heaps praises on six well-feathered benefactors, all from one family, whose contribution was outstanding:

And remembered be for good Kyris [Master] Hoples and Kyra [Mistress] Protone and [Master] Sallustius his son-in-law, and Comes Phroros his son and [Master] Photios his son-in-law and [Master] Haninah his son – they and their children – whose acts of charity are constant everywhere (and) who have given here five denarii (of) gold. May the King of the Universe bestow [...] blessing upon their work. Amen. Amen. Selah. (E. L. Sukenik, “The Ancient Synagogue of El-Hammeh,” *The Journal of the Palestine Oriental Society* 15 [1935], p. 131)

This tribute was framed by a circular medallion and ornamented with a pair of lions and two graceful cypresses. Much of the original

synagogue walls remain, including some arches and a few ornate capitals from fallen columns. The dedication, however, now decorates the entrance to Israel's Supreme Court building in Jerusalem.

Disenfranchised

Hamat Gader's star turned supernova in the Byzantine period, after pious Empress Eudocia so enjoyed her spa experience that she invested heavily in extending, overhauling, and upgrading the facilities. Most important, she plastered the walls with paeans to her "modest" efforts.

After the Muslim conquest, the area's new overlords maintained the place, including a facelift after a seventh-century earthquake. But further tremors, particularly an eighth-century megaquake, put a damper on any more repairs.

For centuries, Hamat Gader stood derelict, its waters running tearfully down into the Yarmuk River. Finally, at the beginning of the 1900s, the Ottomans woke up to the site's potential and built a hamam over Ain er-Rih, one of its less impressive springs. Both the bath and its reception were lukewarm. Not much is left of the building, and it's currently closed to the public.

Hamat Gader came into its own again only with the British Mandate, when a rich Arab effendi named Suleiman Nassif was awarded a government license for a modern spa onsite. After twenty years of planning, deliberating, and organizing, construction commenced in partnership with Haifa entrepreneur Ze'ev Sapir. The small fortune Sapir added to Nassif's investment paid for a forty-five-bed sanatorium, but attacks in the area soon originated from Syrian and Jordanian

territory during the Arab Revolt, scaring away all the Jews involved.

Renamed el-Hamma, Nassif ran the place for nineteen years under Syrian rule, after the War of Independence redrew the borders of the Jewish state. Adding a glitzy nightclub, he catered to wealthy Arab families from neighboring countries as well as hosting Soviet-Syrian military liaison meetings – until Israel conquered the Golan Heights in the Six-Day War.

Sapir returned to Hamat Gader following the war, delighted to find the hotel complex in good shape, and courteously escorted his erstwhile partner's family over the border to Syria. He then applied for a permit to redecorate, but the Israeli government handed the site over to the United Kibbutz Movement instead.

With commendable energy, the members of five nearby settlements quickly built a bathing complex around Ain Bulus, Hamat Gader's second-hottest spring. Alas, just before its 42° C waters opened to the public in 1969, Syrian terrorists blew up the building. More such incidents followed, delaying the grand opening until late 1977.

Rejuvenated since then, Hamat Gader now spans some thirty-seven acres. With half a million visitors a year, the hot springs are hotter than ever. Attractions include water slides, a boutique hotel, a spa, and a petting zoo. But the main draw is a relatively recent addition – a crocodile farm, whose slow-moving, toothy reptiles add a whole new dimension to the concept of rest and relaxation. □



Tamar Hayardeni

A licensed tour guide and research fellow at the Ben-Zvi Institute, Hayardeni has also authored several children's books

After the Six-Day War, Israel handed Hamat Gader over to local kibbutzim, ignoring its Israeli investor

Handy Info



Where to Eat

Mezah Restaurant

Eliezer Kaplan Street, Tiberias
Kosher, dairy,
053-380-3338

Avi's Restaurant

1 Ha-kishon Street, Tiberias
Kosher, meat,
050-307-7077, (04) 679-1747

Gillis

Moshav Nov
Kosher, meat,
(04) 676-3555



Don't Miss

Kinneret Compound

Zionist pioneering site
Entry fee, (04) 670-9117

Naharayim Park

Former power station
and dam tour
Entry fee, 073-756-9371

Tel Saki

Yom Kippur War Memorial
Free entry