

# Masada

## A desert mountain shines at the Dead Sea

By Iris Sanderson Jones  
special writer

The name Masada will dominate your television screen during the next week. The legendary desert mountain, on the Israeli side of the Dead Sea, will be the subject of an ABC-TV mini-series April 5-8, starring Peter O'Toole, Peter Strauss and Anthony Quayle.

Masada is the Hebrew word for fortress. King Herod built a fortress, palace and huge water cisterns on this desolate mountain top during the first century B.C., and 960 Jewish men, women and children defended it to their death against the Romans 100 years later.

That three-year siege, and the story of those 960 defenders who chose death over capture, is the subject of the ABC novel-for-television entitled Masada. The mini-series was actually filmed more than a year ago but was withheld from television so that viewers would not compare it with the mass suicides in Jonestown, Guyana, in 1978.

The saga of Masada is a good example of the

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unexpected riches to be mined in the desolate red sandstone land beside the Dead Sea. Tourists are often surprised by the interesting travel experience available in this area.

The 50-mile-long Dead Sea, which is fed by the Jordan River and the Sea of Galilee to the north, is 1,300 feet below sea level, making it the lowest point on earth. Crystal white islands of salt float in the clear blue water between the desert mountains on the Jordanian side and the equally barren red desert mountains on the eastern side.

It doesn't sound like a part of the earth that has much to offer, so tourists are pleasantly surprised at what they find there. Just beyond the northern end of the sea, its streets lined with fruit stands, is the oasis city of Jericho, which is claimed to be the oldest-inhabited city in the world.

Going south, you pass Qumran, where the Essenes hid the Dead Sea Scrolls in a cave full of pottery jars 2000 years ago; today they are treasures displayed in the Shrine of the Book in Jerusalem.

Half way down the eastern shore, a spring-fed area at En Gedi greens the desert. Here you can stay in a kibbutz guest house and swim, with no fear of sinking, in the 33 percent salinity of the Dead Sea.

At the shallow southern end of the sea, past a cluster of spa hotels, the Dead Sea Museum shows you how the potash industry has been developed at the Dead Sea Works.

On the Dead Sea Road, half way between the Dead Sea Works and En Gedi, the desert rises in wind-shaped gargoyles of sand to the desert mountains around Masada. Tourist buses wind up the rising road, past outlines of ancient Roman encampments, to the cable car which carries passengers to the top.

From the bottom of the mountain, Masada makes a sculpted red sandstone shape against the blue desert sky. A narrow winding trail, which the hazy early hours up at sunrise, winds up the side of the mountain. If you did not know otherwise, you could easily believe this was a flat-topped mesa in Utah.

From here, there is very little sign of the massive construction project. King Herod created above, one of many such palaces and fortresses he built around ancient Judea. He never actually lived in this place, but it was there in all its glory if he needed it.

From the top, you can look down on the outlines of 2000-year-old Roman encampments, only recently uncovered by archaeologists. This mountaintop and those encampments are the settings in which the television drama is played.

The Romans had conquered Judea more than a century before. Eventually the Judean people revolted. The Romans had destroyed the Second Temple in Jerusalem and driven the last remaining rebels to the mountain fortress at Masada when the siege began.

For three years the Jews held out against Roman bombardment. When defeat became inevitable, they chose to kill themselves rather than become Roman slaves. The Jews destroyed everything except their food supply, to show the Romans they did not die because of starvation.

The ruins of Masada are still very visible on the summit. Israeli children visit Masada as part of their school curriculum. Certain units of the Israel Defense Forces hold their searing-in ceremonies here.

From the top, you can also see the desert and the Dead Sea spreading away to north and south. Across the sea are the Moab Mountains of Jordan, from which Moses first saw the promised land.

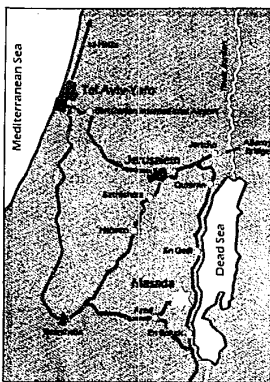
For information on visiting the Dead Sea area, contact the Israeli Government Tourist Office at 5 S. Wabash Ave., No. 1402, Chicago, IL 60603.



ABOVE: The summit of Masada is reached by cable cars which operate every 15 minutes from the eastern side of the mountain. A snaking path for hikers is also available.



ABOVE: The mineral and chemical properties of the Dead Sea form shapes on the shore.



LEFT: Masada is located about 90 minutes' drive from Jerusalem and 2 1/2 hours from Tel Aviv.

travel log  
**Iris Jones**  
contributing travel editor

### On the road through desert

Scenes of the desert on the way from Beersheba to Masada:

- A group of young soldiers in training race across the desert to the road, and beyond to the army encampment clustered under a few trees.
- Two young Bedouin women with two small children leading donkeys approach the road. Bedouin farm buildings and tents are scattered across the dry hills beyond. We see a tractor, a camel and a herd of sheep on a small farm near the road. There are 32,000 Bedouins, in four tribes, here in the Negev.
- A woman in light robes, with a black velvet shawl over her head and shoulders, carries a child in her left arm as she leads a donkey up the hill.
- A young shepherd girl leads sheep through a dry gully. Another leads a second flock of sheep across a hill. The Bedouins know where to find the water holes; they back up the water that gathers in the wadis during winter rains.
- Two men on horseback. Tin stacks atop a hill. Sheep eating the sagebrush growing scantily on rocky sand. A Bedouin school.
- A distant mound that is Tel Arad. A tel is a mound of desert sand covering an old settlement, the dream of archaeologists. This settlement was first mentioned 3700 years ago in Egyptian records.
- Camel wool tents on a hilltop, with a group of camels nearby.
- The road rising suddenly into the modern Israeli city of Arad. Young people wear blue jeans and shirts as they move between modern apartment buildings.
- As we mount the hill at Arad, which has four four-star hotels, we see more desert hills running steeply downhill towards the Dead Sea. That is the way all this land looked until Arad was built 18 years ago.
- We are 1,800 feet above sea level as we start down the road that will take us to 1,300 feet below sea level at the Dead Sea. We can go along the coast to Masada or inland 22 miles to the Romans did.
- This Judean desert wears a green carpet only in winter, when the tiny rations of rain falls — two inches a year. The closer we get to the Dead Sea, the more the wadis form dry mini-canyons.
- We pass the sea level sign as a view of the Dead Sea opens in blue mist below us. At a panoramic overlook, we see down past the village of Shefach Zohar and a landscape of folded gullies to the sea.
- At the Dead Sea Museum we meet Shlomo Drori, who has a dream. His dream is to complete the project already approved but not funded, which will open an \$8 million tunnel from the Mediterranean Sea to the Dead Sea. The Dead Sea is evaporating faster than it is refilling, because so much water is being diverted from the Sea of Galilee and the Jordan River to irrigation projects.
- Finally, a pillar of salt, which travel guides will cheerfully tell you is Lot's wife.

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