

# Roman Baths, Alligators, Hot Springs



HAMMAT GADER, ISRAEL: - THE NATURAL POOLS OF HAMMAT GADER ATTRACT OVER ONE THOUSAND VISITORS DAILY. THE WATER TEMPERATURE AVERAGES 85 DEGREES FAHRENHEIT, YET IS IMMENSELY REFRESHING. OTHER ATTRACTIONS AT THE HAMMAT GADER PARK ARE THE EXCAVATIONS OF THE SECOND LARGEST NETWORK OF BATHS IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE, AND POOLS OF ALLIGATORS NOW BEING BRED IN THE HOLY LAND.

BY RALPH VAN KIPPEN

"It is the largest, possibly the most magnificent network of Roman baths found anywhere in the world," so saying, Mickey Geago leads us off to inspect the excavations of the baths at Hammat Gader.

"Follow me, and we'll go and see the alligators." And off we troop, following behind a young man with a New York accent called Guy Ben Moshe. Alligators?

Hammat Gader is quite remarkable; it nestles on the shore of the River Yarmuk in a deep valley - not far from the legendary Sea of Galilee. It has natural hot mineral springs, whose water gurgles to the surface at an amazing 125 degrees fahrenheit. And it was here that the Romans built a vast, elaborate network of bath houses. Mickey Geago, our guide, came to Israel fifteen years ago from the tiny fishing village of Mousehold on England's Cornwall coast. Few traces of a Cornish accent remain; he is an Israeli now and is one of the excava-

tors of the Roman bath complex. The baths of Hammat Gader have been known for millenia. The first century B.C. Greek traveler, Estrabo, wrote about them; so did geographer El Mukadas in the tenth century and the 13th century Jewish traveller Ashrori Haparchi.

The landscape around Hammat Gader has changed just a little since these ancient travelers' visits. The vegetation was always lush - but now the lushness is intensified with grove after grove of banana trees. The drive to Hammat Gader is fascinating. The road turns away from the Sea of Galilee and follows the course of the Yarmuk River, which flows, deep in a canyon to the south. As the road twists and turns, neck - wrenching vistas open up, one of which is of the girdered bridge across the canyon carrying the now defunct Hejaz railway lines which once took trains from Haifa to Baghdad. The entrance to the actual park of Hammat Gader has a wild-west look with log fences and turnpike - style toll booths - but that anachronism is quickly surpassed by the overwhelming sight of the excavations of the baths.

### THE BATHS

The baths built at Hammat Gader were, according to the fourth century Greek historian Eunapeis, "the second largest in the Roman Empire." They were in constant use during the 2nd and 3rd centuries, were extensively restored in the 7th century and fell into disuse in the 9th century, after which centuries of earth, debris and neglect took over only to be removed in a series of excavations starting in 1979.

Like Roman baths all over the world, the Hammat Gader bath complex incorporated different pools for different purposes. The Frigidarium - the cold water pool; the Tepidarium - the lukewarm water pool; and the Caldarium - the hot water pool -- were all constructed so as best to utilize the hot water of the natural springs. The genius of Roman engineering is evident everywhere. Extensive use was made of lead pipes for water supply and drainage; there were intricate heating and cooling systems, and a whole array of sophisticated accessories were used by the Roman designers in their attempt to create optimum bathing conditions.

THE HALL OF PILLARS is possibly the most magnificent of all. This was the "Tepidarium," which held the most comfortable water tempera-



HAMMAT GADER, ISRAEL: - PART OF THE EXCAVATED ROMAN BATHS AT THE NORTHERN ISRAEL SITE OF HAMMAT GADER, THE NETWORK OF BATHS IS THE SECOND LARGEST IN THE ENTIRE ROMAN EMPIRE - AND HAS BEEN EXTENSIVELY UNCOVERED DURING FOUR YEARS OF EXCAVATIONS WHICH BEGAN IN 1979.

ture of all pools. Two rows of pillars once supported an enormous roof that reached 14 meters above the floor. It is awesome to realize that the roof rose another 18 feet above the reconstructed arch. The Hall of Pillars has been identified as the site of the famous orgies, without which no self - respecting Roman bath would be complete.

### LEPERS POOL

The discovery of the LEPERS' POOL caused considerable excitement among the archaeological community, since the pool matches exactly the description recorded by the 6th century traveller Antonius Plakentia, who visited the

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