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# The hidden treasures between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv

The pastoral view, the luxurious rooms and the high-quality food at the hotel make it a prime starting point to explore the area. The only danger is that it's so relaxing, you might never leave.

By DAVID BRINN FEBRUARY 16, 2020 09:46



NEVE ILAN C HOTEL provides a luxury stay in a convenient location  
(photo credit: GARY ROZNIKOVSKI)

The giant [Elvis](#) statue at the Elvis Inn looms like a surreal retro beacon off the Jerusalem-Tel Aviv highway, beckoning visitors with promises of blue suede shoes and hound dogs.

A touristy landmark, the edifice to the king of rock & roll near the entrance to

moshav Neveh Ilan (known for hosting the Big Brother reality show and the Channel 2 news) tends to overshadow the treasures hidden behind the trees and hills of surrounding area. Called the Mateh Yehuda Region, the sprawling expanse between the Sha'ar Hagay interchange and the Motza interchange about 15 minutes away encompasses some 200 square miles and 57 communities, including Beit Zayit to the East, Srigim to the South, Nes Harim in the center and Gefen to the West, and some 60,000 residents.

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Most travelers between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem zoom right past on the new highway or the high-speed train, but Mateh Yehuda offers attractions that shouldn't be missed – including breathtaking landscapes and rich history, numerous hiking trails, archaeological sites and close to 50 wineries. No wonder it's being touted as the Tuscany region of Israel.

One of the best ways to explore the area is using the Neve Ilan C Hotel as a base. Once a moshav-owned and operated endeavor, the 175-room hotel was taken over by the C Hotel chain in 2002, and has undergone a series of major upgrades.

"It's a vacation spot with a different feeling for those who like to be in the Jerusalem area but not stay right in the city," said C Hotel's CEO Dudu Oz, hosting a group of journalists recently in the hotel's spacious lobby.

In addition to hosting overnight visitors, the hotel has a thriving conference business, with multiple banquet rooms available for day use. In addition, a successful Friday morning breakfast club has been launched that includes brunch in the hotel's dining room and spotlight lectures on subjects ranging from Arik Einstein to Adolf Eichmann.

The pastoral view, the luxurious rooms and the high-quality food at the hotel make it a prime starting point to explore the area. The only danger is that it's so relaxing, you might never get out of the front door.

Luckily, our group had a guide, Barak Katz, the tourism coordinator for the Mateh Yehuda Regional Council, whose enthusiasm and knowledge provided the impetus to set out on an afternoon of merriment, all within a 20-minute drive of the hotel.

Our first stop was one of those 40 wineries: the Flam Winery across from Moshav Eshtaol. Founded in 1998 by brothers Golan and Gilad Flam, the winery boasts an incredible view of the Judean Hills, and sitting in its vine-covered patio with a glass of their classic red, it's easy to forget that you're in Israel and not in Italy. Golan revealed the audience with his encyclopedic knowledge of wine and the Zionist motives behind his family's business.

Visits including tastings are welcome, and must be booked in advance. Hours are Sunday-Thursday, 10a.m.-5 p.m. and Fridays from 10a.m.-3 p.m. To reserve, call 02-992-9923 or write to [info@flamwinery.com](mailto:info@flamwinery.com).

Next up was the Orchid Café and Greenhouse at the entrance to Kibbutz Ma'aleh Hahamisha – a charming, old structure which, like its name suggests, combines a working greenhouse with a restaurant/cafe that serves dairy and vegan offerings.

Supposedly, it's almost impossible to get a seat there on Friday mornings, and a sampling of the delectable pizzas and focaccia on the menu confirms why. It was another location – laid back, unpretentious and inviting – that you might have to be dragged away from.

The kosher eatery is open Sunday-Thursday from 8:30 a.m.-10 p.m. and on Friday from 8:30 a.m.-3 p.m. Phone: 053-937-9635

Filled with food and wine, it was time for something different and that was provided by an hour at the Yvel Diamond Visitors Center near the Motza interchange.

Yvel is the world renown luxury jewelry brand founded by Orna and Isaac Levy in 1986 (Yvel is Levy backwards). The showroom is stunning, but the real gem of the 50,000-square foot facility is the tour of the company's Megemeria School of Jewelry & Art that the Levys established in 2010. Each year, some 20 Ethiopian immigrants are given scholarships to study the art of jewelry making and then hired by Yvel.

Visitors can observe the students at work and have the opportunity to purchase their unique handcrafted jewelry at the Megemeria Craft Center, which features the culture, story and journey of Ethiopian Jewry, as well as offering some tasty and aromatic traditional coffee.

Don't miss the riveting film on the history of the company at the comfortable Yvel Theater.

The center offers organized tours all year round. Hours are Sunday-Thursday, 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Friday only through prior reservation. Phone: 02-673-5811 or write to [Support@yvel.com](mailto:Support@yvel.com).

The group was drooping, but spirits picked up when we arrived at the Galita Chocolate Farm on Kibbutz Tzbuva. The sister business of the original on Kibbutz Degania Bet, Galita is a chocolate-lover's dream come true.

Chocolate workshops at the kosher establishment run by a very friendly staff is a blast for kids and adults alike, allowing even jaded journalists the chance to design their own candy bars and learn how to make the famous Israeli invention: mikupelet.

If you need more chocolate, the adjacent store offers more than varieties and shapes than you can possibly take home.

To reserve a workshop and clarify prices, call 02-534-7650. Hours are Sunday-Thursday, 10a.m.-6 p.m., Friday, 10 a.m.-4 p.m.

After that action-packed afternoon, it was back to Neveh Ilan for an opulent meat-based buffet dinner, including parve desserts that were almost too pretty to eat.

Finally, we were free to go back to our palatial rooms, complete with Jacuzzis, for the perfect ending to a perfect day.

The dinner, however, was just an appetizer to the sumptuous array of freshly prepared foods laid out for the breakfast buffet. It had everything one would expect from an Israeli hotel breakfast, plus a little more.

Leaving the hotel content but heavier by a few pounds, the takeaway for all involved was that Elvis is really calling out to travelers to veer off the Jerusalem-Tel Aviv highway and discover a world of adventure and delights.

*Rooms at the Neve Ilan C Hotel run from NIS 900-1,300 mid-week and NIS 1,200-2,000 for weekends (price for a couple with two children, including breakfast).*

*For more information, call 073-313-3182, or go to [www.c-hotels.co.il](http://www.c-hotels.co.il)*

*The writer was a guest of the Neve Ilan C Hotel and the Mateh Yehuda Regional Council.*

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