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# A tour of the tunnel

**Sheldon Kirshner**  
Staff reporter

**T**he Western Wall, the last known remnant of the Second Temple, destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE, is one of the holiest Jewish sites in Israel.

By day or by night, Jews by the hundreds pray at the cobblestone plaza abutting the weathered limestone wall, tucking notes into its crevices in the hope that their fondest wishes may be granted.

## Feature

The open air portion of the wall, about 60 metres long, constitutes but a small proportion of it.

Much of the wall, which is actually more than 400 metres in length, lies six metres beneath the teeming Muslim quarter in eastern Jerusalem, captured by Israel in the 1967 Six Day War.

The Western Wall Tunnel, which has been fully opened to the public since 1996, permits visitors to explore the

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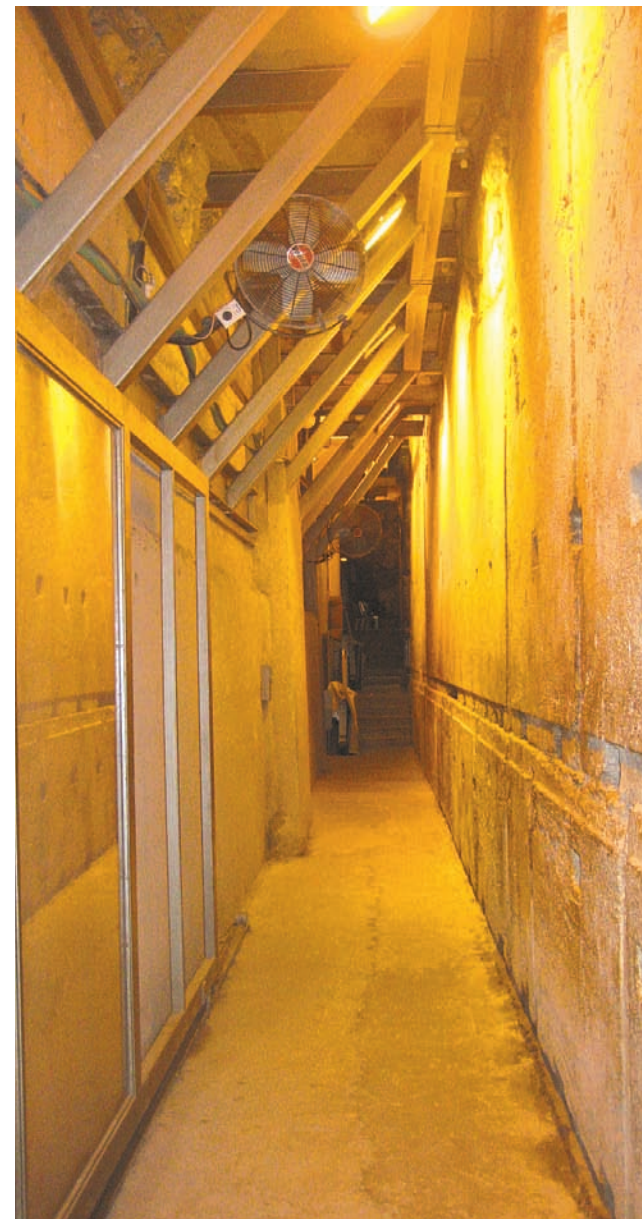
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Inside the Western Wall Tunnel  
[Sheldon Kirshner photo]

wall's subterranean segment.

A tour of the tunnel – which connects the Western Wall prayer area to the northwest side of the Temple Mount, a religious compound important both to Judaism and Islam – has been compared to travelling back to the Second Temple epoch in a time machine.

This tumultuous era incorporates the Hasmonean period, the rule of Herod the Great and the Roman destruction of Jerusalem.

In the depths, a visitor casts eyes on massive walls and intimidating columns, the remains of a once buzzing thoroughfare, plaza and market, plus a mikvah, cistern and reservoir.

Who would have known?

Before Roman legions sacked Jerusalem, King Herod launched a construction project to double the size of the Temple Mount by building four retaining walls. As it happened, they survived the sacking of Jerusalem.

Over the centuries, the area was covered by debris and new buildings, consigning the hidden part of the Western Wall to oblivion.

Jewish scholars never quite figured out what its precise dimensions were. They had to wait until the last third of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to find out

Two British researchers, Charles Wilson and Charles Warren, discovered sections of the present-day tunnel. But their work was hampered by the Ottoman authorities.

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# A new perspective on the Western Wall

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Shortly after the Six Day War, the Israeli government began technically challenging excavations to expose the Western Wall in its entirety.

The work took two decades to complete.

When the northern exit of the Western Wall Tunnel was officially inaugurated, Arab riots erupted, causing the deaths of 15 Israeli soldiers and 60 Palestinians and casting a pall on the Oslo peace process.

The Palestinian Authority, then headed by Yasser Arafat, darkly claimed that the tunnel would undermine the foundations of the nearby Temple Mount.

No such thing has happened.

Fifteen years on, the divisive politics of the Arab-Israeli conflict seem far removed from the tunnel, one of Jerusalem's major tourist attractions.

The guided tour, which is usually by appointment, lasts approximately an hour. Visitors pass a scale model of the Second Temple before descending deeper into the relatively well lit tunnel.

I was warned that people prone to claustrophobia, like myself, should avoid the tunnel. The foot path through it was indeed narrow at times, but I never felt the queasy sensation of walls closing in.

If anything, the tunnel tour provides a new perspective on the Western Wall, Jerusalem and ancient Jewish history. Three for the price of one.



Visitors descend to the entrance of the Western Wall tunnel. [Isranet photo]

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