Masada is a symbol of Jewish steadfastness

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Staff reporter

Feature

Wittily philosophizing about "tropical climes" at "certain times of the day," British playwright/composer/singer Noel Coward memorably wrote that only "mad dogs and Englishman go out in the midday sun."

Coward's amusing lyrics came to mind recently as I began walking up the steep, winding Snake Path toward the summit of Masada, the ancient Jewish rebel fortress conquered by a Roman army in 74 CE.

The trek up the Snake Path, rediscovered by Israeli archeologists in 1953, is recommended only for the physically fit. But on broiling summer days, when the temperature can easily reach at least 40 degrees celsius, intrepid walkers are cautioned to start their climb up to the 450-metre high rocky plateau early in the morning, before the weather becomes unbearably hot.

Since our group of Canadian journalists arrived at the eastern base of Masada long past this recommended hour, we were strongly advised to take the cable car. Five of us, flaunting the sound advice of our experienced guide, made for the Snake Path, which is entirely exposed to the burning sun of the Judean Desert.

The narrow trail was composed of loose rock and 700 rudimentary steps configured in a series of switchbacks. As I ascended, occasionally pausing to rest and drink water, I took in wonderful panoramic views of desiccated grey hills, the shimmering Dead Sea and the brooding Moab Mountains in neighbouring Jordan.

I made it to the summit in 45 minutes – my colleagues close behind – drenched in perspiration despite the super dry heat. After a brief break, I was ready to tour Masada, which I had last seen about two decades ago.

I was eager to revisit such attractions as the northern palace, the bathhouse and the breaching point, all of which have been extensively renovated.

Masada, one of the most important archeological sites in Israel, and a United Nations World Heritage site, was built by a Hasmonean monarch. Herod, a Judean king during the Second Temple period, fortified Masada and added a palatial winter palace and cisterns.

When the Jews of Judea – a Roman province – rose up in rebellion against their imperial masters in 66 CE, Roman legions descended upon the dissenters. The Galilee was subjugated, and in 70 CE the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, with the victorious Romans carting its treasures back to Rome.

Jewish rebels under the leadership of Eleazer Ben Yair fled to Masada, whose remote location and natural defences initially favoured the Jews.

The Roman siege of Masada, the final act in the Roman conquest of Judea, lasted a few months. The Tenth Roman Legion, commanded by Flavius Silva and consisting of some 8,000 troops, prepared for the anticipated battle by building eight camps, a siege wall, an earthen ramp and a battering ram.

Realizing that the Romans would prevail, Ben Yair convinced 960 of his fellow Jews that death was better than surrender and enslavement. As he put it, "Let our wives die before they are abused, and our children before they have tasted slavery… We have preferred death to slavery."

All but several of its inhabitants committed suicide rather than fall into the hands of the Romans. The survivors, two women and five children who had hidden in cisterns during the final days of the siege, told their story to Josephus, a former Jewish commander in the Galilee who had accommodated himself to Roman rule.

Josephus wrote about Masada in *The Wars of the Jews,* the only account on the historic siege.

When the Tenth Roman Legion left Masada, it remained uninhabited for a few hundred years until Christians built a monastery there during the Byzantine era. With the rise of Islam in the seventh century, the building fell into disuse, becoming a flyblown relic of a murky past.

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An aerial view of Masada. ***[Isranet photo]***

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Today the fortress is a beacon of freedom

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During the 19th century, British adventurers explored Masada and a succession of European archeologists studied it.

The Hebrew translation of *The Wars of the Jews* in the 1920s heightened interest about Masada in the Yishuv, the Jewish community of Palestine. The Zionist narrative regarded Masada as a symbol of Jewish courage and steadfastness in the face of overwhelming odds.

From 1963 to 1965, the Israeli ex-general, archeologist and future politician Yigael Yadin carried our major excavations at Masada. Yadin uncovered the skeletal remains of 28 people. He also found many buildings and thousands of artifacts, which provided scholars with a much clearer picture of life during the Second Temple epoch. Further excavations were undertaken by Ehud Netzer in 1989 and 1995.

Masada National Park was opened in 1966 and the first cable car was put into service in 1971, increasing tourist traffic. Until the advent of the cable car, the Snake Path in the east and the less challenging Ramp Path in the west were the only ways of accessing the wonders of Masada.

Shortly after reaching Masada via the Snake Path, I stopped at the refurbished ruins of the northern palace, Masada's showpiece. Incorporating Hellenistic and Roman architectural elements, it is built on three rock terraces overlooking the Dead Sea and supported by sturdy retaining walls. The palace contains private rooms, a patio and bathhouses whose walls are adorned with remarkably preserved frescoes.

The biggest structure on the grounds, the western palace, was built around a courtyard containing living rooms and reception rooms – some of which are decorated with colorful mosaics – and bathing facilities.

Constructed during Herod's time, the synagogue was converted into a house of worship during the revolt against the Romans. Archeologists working here stumbled upon sacred scrolls, suggesting that parts of the shul could have been a geniza, a repository for all manner of documents.

Visitors climb the Snake Path to the top of the fortress. ***[Isranet photo]***

The outlines of both the Roman siege wall and the camps, from which the assault was launched, are still visible. They supposedly form the most complete surviving Roman siege system in the world.

The cisterns, which could hold 40,000 cubic metres of water, were dry on the day of my visit. But the rugged landscape adjacent to them was awesome.

Masada, the last Jewish bastion to succumb to the Romans, is filled to the brim with a profusion of such splendid sights.

Masada was once a place of despair, but today it is a beacon of freedom.

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