

THE OCCUPIED SYRIAN GOLAN

ALTERNATIVE TOURISM

MAJDAL SHAMS - VALLEY OF TEARS - CEASEFIRE LINE - MOUNT HARMOON - APPLE AND CHERRY ORCHARDS - LAKE RAM - DESTROYED SYRIAN VILLAGES - QUNEITRA - MOUNT TAL ABO EL NADA - HIKING - LOCAL SYRIAN FOOD

Al-Marsad - The Arab Centre for Human Rights in the Golan Heights provides alternative tours challenging the Israeli narrative of the occupied Syrian Golan. We offer an alternative account of the history of the region and show the beauty of the Golan through a human rights lens. Our tours contribute to the local Syrian economy and give the local Syrian population the opportunity to discuss with visitors the reality of life under occupation. We provide different types of tours, according to your availability, interest and budget.

Background

The area known as the Syrian Golan or Golan Heights is a mountainous plateau in southwest Syria. During the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, Israel militarily occupied over two-thirds of the Syrian Golan. Today, this area is known as the occupied Syrian Golan / Golan Heights.

Following the Israeli occupation, approximately 130,000 native Syrian inhabitants were forcibly transferred or displaced from their homes. Only five percent of the original population was able to remain. Subsequently, the Israeli military began a widespread campaign to demolish Syrian homes, destroying one city and 340 villages and farms. These were replaced by Israeli settlements, often built with stones from the destroyed villages and farms. Syrian names of the majority of geographic, cultural and historic sites were also altered or replaced as part of a process of 'Israelization' of the Golan.

Today, there are 23,000 Israeli settlers in the Golan, living in 34 illegal settlements. Together with the Israeli military and authorities, they control 95% of the land. The remaining native Syrian population numbers approximately 25,000 people who live in five villages located in the far north of the Golan: Majdal Shams, Masada, Buqata, En Qinia and Ghajar.



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As a result, the Golan has been represented as an unpopulated space, which - in the context of tourism – has fostered an image of the Golan as a place of tranquillity and stunning natural beauty for visitors to enjoy.



Indeed, the Golan has long been promoted by the Israeli government and tourism industry, marketing it as “Northern Israel,” and referring to it as the “Israeli Texas” due to its size. The region attracts over two million visitors every year. Consequently, tourism is a staple of the settlement economy in the Golan.



The Israeli government and businesses promote the area’s natural beauty as a site for hiking, camping, biking, horseback riding, outdoor sports, sightseeing, wine-tasting, and picking fruit. Travel websites that advertise accommodation in the Golan list a plethora of ‘rural guesthouses’, cabins, bed & breakfasts, and camping sites. These promoted activities and accommodation are almost all either located in settlements or owned by settlers.



By promoting tourism in the Golan, Israel seeks to normalise the occupation and create a narrative that covers up the injustices committed against the native Syrian population forced to leave the Golan, and the remaining Syrian population living under military occupation.

Here at Al-Marsad, we seek to challenge that perspective and offer an alternative narrative, giving the local Syrian population a voice to speak about their experiences under the occupation.

Tours

Majdal Shams walking or bus tour (± 3 hours)



Majdal Shams is the largest of the five remaining Syrian villages in the Golan and is located on the slopes of Mt Harmoon (Jabal al-Shaikh in Arabic / Hermon in Hebrew). The visit starts in Al Marsad’s office, where our guide will tell you about the history of the Golan and the current situation under the Israeli occupation. After, you will walk through Majdal Shams, passing by an Israeli military base located in the village centre and various landmine fields in residential areas. You will then visit the “valley of tears”, also known as “shouting hill”, by the fortified ceasefire line separating the Golan from the rest of Syria. Before modern technology, Syrian families separated from each other since 1967 used to come here, to see and speak to each other using binoculars and loudspeakers. The tour ends with coffee or tea at the home of a local resident, where you will have the opportunity to speak to them about life under occupation.



A view of Majdal Shams



Ceasefire line and "valley of tears"





Orchard valley walking tour (± 3 hours)

At the bottom of Majdal Shams there is a beautiful valley of apple and cherry orchards cultivated by local Syrian farmers. The tour will take you through the orchards, where you will have an opportunity to meet farmers and pick fruit (depending on season). You will then visit Lake Ram, where our guide will address issues such as the illegal exploitation of natural resources in the Golan by Israel and the impact of the occupation on Syrian farmers and the landscape.



A Syrian girl picking cherries



Lake Ram



Destroyed village of Baniyas and Israeli settlements tour (± 4 hours)

You will travel by bus to the Syrian village of Baniyas, which was destroyed by the Israeli authorities following the occupation. Together with your guide, you will visit the remains of the church and mosque, and hear how the local Syrian population was forced to flee their homes. Afterwards, you will visit the illegal Israeli settlements of Nete Ativ - built on a destroyed Syrian village - and Nimrod.



The illegal Israeli settlement of Neve Ativ, built over the destroyed Syrian village of Jubata ez Zeit



Destroyed city of Quneitra and Mt Tal Abo El Nada tour (± 4 hours)

Located in the centre of the Golan, close to the fortified ceasefire line, the city of Quneitra was the largest Syrian city in the Golan before the Israeli occupation. Israeli occupying forces used Quneitra for military training from 1967-74 and completely destroyed the remainder of the city with dynamite as they withdrew in 1974. Mt Tal Abo El Nada (meaning "hill of dew" in English, and called "Bental" in Hebrew) offers a unique view of the now abandoned city of Quneitra. During the tour, it is possible to enjoy a traditional Syrian picnic lunch with a panoramic view of Mt Harmoon (Jabal al-Shaikh in Arabic / Hermon in Hebrew), which is the highest mountain in the region and sits on the border between Syria and Lebanon.



Hiking

The Golan is a land of contradictions: it offers stunning landscapes interwoven with destroyed Syrian villages, minefields and Israeli military bases and settlements. Al Marsad's goal is to offer a unique experience that enables visitors to understand the different aspects of this region. One way through which visitors can experience the Golan's natural beauty and history is through a hiking tour.

Village of Ghajar, and Hasbani & Banias river hiking tour (± 4 hours)

The Hasbani river runs from Lebanon into the Golan close to Ghajar, an Alawite village located on the Lebanon and Golan border. Ghajar is a military zone not accessible to foreigners, which means our hike will start at the checkpoint at the entrance of the village. Your guide will then take you to the Banias river ("Nahal Senir" in Hebrew – Snir is the name of the Israeli settlement located next to the Banias river). You will see the ruins of Yehudiya village, an ancient Syrian village at the top of some cliffs, and follow the trail leading down into a canyon and to a stream. Following the stream, you will reach a beautiful waterfall (accessible by descending a ladder about 8 meters high) and natural water pool, where you can enjoy a traditional Syrian picnic lunch. During the tour, we will also visit Syrian market stalls, selling local produce such as honey and cheese.

Nimrod castle, Banias spring and waterfall hiking tour (all day / ± 4 hours)

The hike starts from the ruins of Nimrod castle, a medieval castle situated on the slopes of Mt Harmoon (Jabal al-Shaikh in Arabic / Hermon in Hebrew). Going downhill, you can enjoy the beautiful scenery whilst walking through the valley. Located at the foot of the mountain, you will visit Banias, an ancient site that developed around the source of the Banias river, one of the main tributaries of the Jordan River. After visiting the remains of the site, the trail heads towards a waterfall and several spring pools. There, you can enjoy a traditional Syrian picnic lunch. It is also possible to visit Syrian market stalls, selling local produce. Upon request, a shorter trail (± 4 hours) starting in Banias is also available.

Additional attractions

There are many additional attractions in the Golan and the surrounding area that Al-Marsad can help organise, such as:

- Swimming and kayaking on the Jordan River
- Sailing and swimming in Lake Tiberias / Sea of Galilee
- Al Hummi (Hamad Ghader) hot natural springs and swimming pools
- Hiking in the valley of Ala'al crossing the so called "black and white" waterfall (southern Golan)
- Hahula natural park (northern Israel)
- Special tour from Majdal Shams along the Galilee and the Lebanese border to the Mediterranean coast

In addition to one day tours, Al-Marsad is also able to organise two or three day tours in the Golan, on request.

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Costs

The cost of tours depends on the exact itinerary, the number of participants, and whether you would like meals, accommodation and transport to be included. As an indication, a 3-hour guided tour with lunch included starts at €45 per person. We cater to every budget, so please get in touch so we can provide you with a detailed quote.

Safety

The Golan is generally very safe and accessible to tourists. That said, your safety is our number one priority, and we monitor safety and security before each and every trip. Please be in touch should you have any concerns.

Accommodation

According to visitors' preferences, a range of different accommodation is available in Majdal Shams and the other remaining Syrian villages in the Golan:

- Hotels: ± €100 per person per night, including breakfast
- The Jawlan Hostel/Guesthouses: ± €40 euro per person per night, including breakfast
- Private houses: ± €50 euro per person per night, including breakfast

Eating out

On request, Al Marsad can organise a traditional Syrian breakfast, lunch or dinner.

- Traditional food in people's homes: €15-30 per person
- Restaurants: €20-40 per person
- Fast food: €5-12 euro per person

How to get here

Majdal Shams and the other four remaining Syrian villages in the Golan are accessible by car and bus from Palestine and Israel. Approximate travel time by car from Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv ranges from 2.5 – 3.5 hours. Travel to the Golan by public transport takes longer. We can provide suggestions for this, on request.

We can also meet you in other locations in the Golan and start a tour from there.