

Avdat National Park

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Welcome to Avdat National Park Station 62 on the Incense Route World Heritage Site

Avdat's paths reveal once more what time and change have hidden!



The Byzantine quarter

Avdat was station number 62 on the Incense Route, which extended from the Arabian Peninsula to the port of Gaza, and from there to all parts of the Roman Empire.

From the Hellenistic to the Late Roman periods (3rd century BCE–3rd century CE), Avdat was a small Nabatean settlement on the Incense Route. The lucrative incense trade was one motive for the construction of the way stations, fortresses and towers which provided security, services and supplies to the traders and the camel caravans plying the route.

In 106 CE the Nabatean King Rabbel II died and his kingdom was annexed to the Roman Empire. During the Byzantine period, in the 4th century, Avdat grew into a large village, with cisterns, agriculture (including grape cultivation), storerooms to hold produce and workshops to process it.

In the early 7th century CE a huge earthquake struck the area, destroying Avdat and leading to its abandonment.

"The Incense Route – Desert Cities in the Negev"

On July 7, 2005, in Durban, South Africa, UNESCO officially inscribed the Incense Route from Orhan Mor in the Arava to Avdat on the Negev Plateau as a World Heritage Site. The route, some 65 km long, includes the ancient cities of Avdat, Halutza, Shivta and Mamshit. Most of the inscribed route is included in the Matsuk HaTsinim Nature Reserve, and the desert cities are national parks.

The 2,400-km-long Incense Route begins in Oman and Yemen and passes through Saudi Arabia and Jordan on the way to the Negev, ending at the port of Gaza. The road and its branches thronged with travelers from the 3rd century BCE to the 3rd century CE.

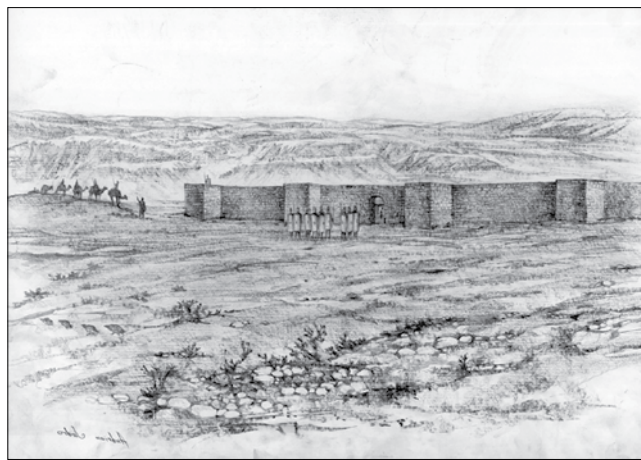
The UNESCO World Heritage Committee inscribed the Incense Route after determining that it met the following criteria:

The Incense Route is exceptional testimony to a culture that has disappeared (criterion no. 3)

The Nabatean cities and their trade routes constitute persuasive evidence of the economic, social and cultural importance of incense – frankincense and myrrh – as well as spices and other products that were transported from the Far East and the Arabian Peninsula to the Hellenistic and Roman world. Moreover, it influenced the cultures of the ancient world and brought people and ideas together.

The route is an outstanding example of traditional land use (criterion no. 5)

The silent remains of the cities, forts, road and milestones, caravansaries and sophisticated agriculture along the Incense Route in the Negev are an extraordinary example of the welcoming desert environment that flourished here for some 700 years.

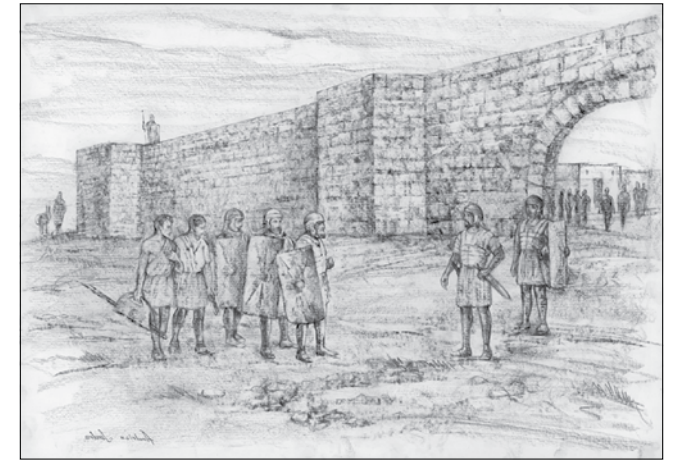


The Roman army camp and the Incense Route

Dear Visitors,

Following these rules will ensure a pleasant visit for you and those who come after you.

- Use only marked paths!
- Obey instructions of national park staff.
- Enter only places that are officially open to visitors.
- Do not harm the antiquities and archaeological findings!
- Do not climb on walls or structures!
- Do not throw or roll stones.
- Do not remain at the site after dark! Overnight camping is allowed only at authorized sites.
- Eat at authorized sites only – near the lower parking lot.
- Keep the area clean.



The Roman army camp

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The Nabateans

The Nabateans (an Aramaic word meaning "cistern diggers") are an ancient people of Arab origin who, beginning in the 4th century BCE, plied the Incense Route from Yemen and Saudi Arabia to the port of Gaza, transporting incense, spices, medicinal plants, textiles, dyes, silver and gold. Some Nabateans lived in and around Petra. Beginning in the 1st century BCE they began to inhabit permanent settlements in the Negev, making their living from trade and commerce. Beginning in the 3rd century CE, changes in the world economic market led them to turn exclusively to farming.

"...The chief productions of Arabia are frankincense and myrrh... Almost in the very center of that region..."

It is said that there are not more than three thousand families which have a right to claim that privilege [trade in frankincense and myrrh], by virtue of hereditary succession..."

(Pliny, Natural History, Book XII, Chapter 30)

During the reign of the Nabatean King Aretas IV (9 BCE–40 CE), the incense trade greatly increased and enriched the kingdom, which reached its zenith at this time. It was then that its main centers developed: Petra – the kingdom's capital in Transjordan and Avdat and Halutza in the Negev. At that time the Petra-Avdat-Gaza road was the main trade route.

The incense, medicinal plants and spices, dyes and precious metals were carried by camels, each of which could carry 150–200 kilos and was led by a handler on foot.

A caravan of 10–20 camels required security, supplies and supervision. The pace was regular, set by the distance maintained between one camel and the next.

"Regular portions of frankincense must be paid to the priests of the lands, their kings, and their scribes. In addition, portions are also taken by guards at gates and their servants. In addition to these, they must pay all the way, in one place for water, elsewhere for a place at the way station, and also for food. Thus, expenses come to 688 denarii even before reaching the Mediterranean. Then our imperial tax officials must be paid again. Because of this, the price of good frankincense can be six denarii per liter, average frankincense can be five denarii, and the third type can be three denarii."

(Pliny, Historia Naturalis, 12:32: 63-65)

The Nabatean kingdom included northern Arabia, Edom, Moab, Hauran, the Negev and Sinai. In 106 CE, the kingdom was transformed into the Roman province of Arabia (Provincia Arabia).

Settlement in the Negev reached its height during the Byzantine period, when Christianity became the official religion. The Nabateans accepted the new faith and Nabatean script was replaced by Greek. Fortresses and magnificent churches were built, roads were developed and farmlands extended at that time.

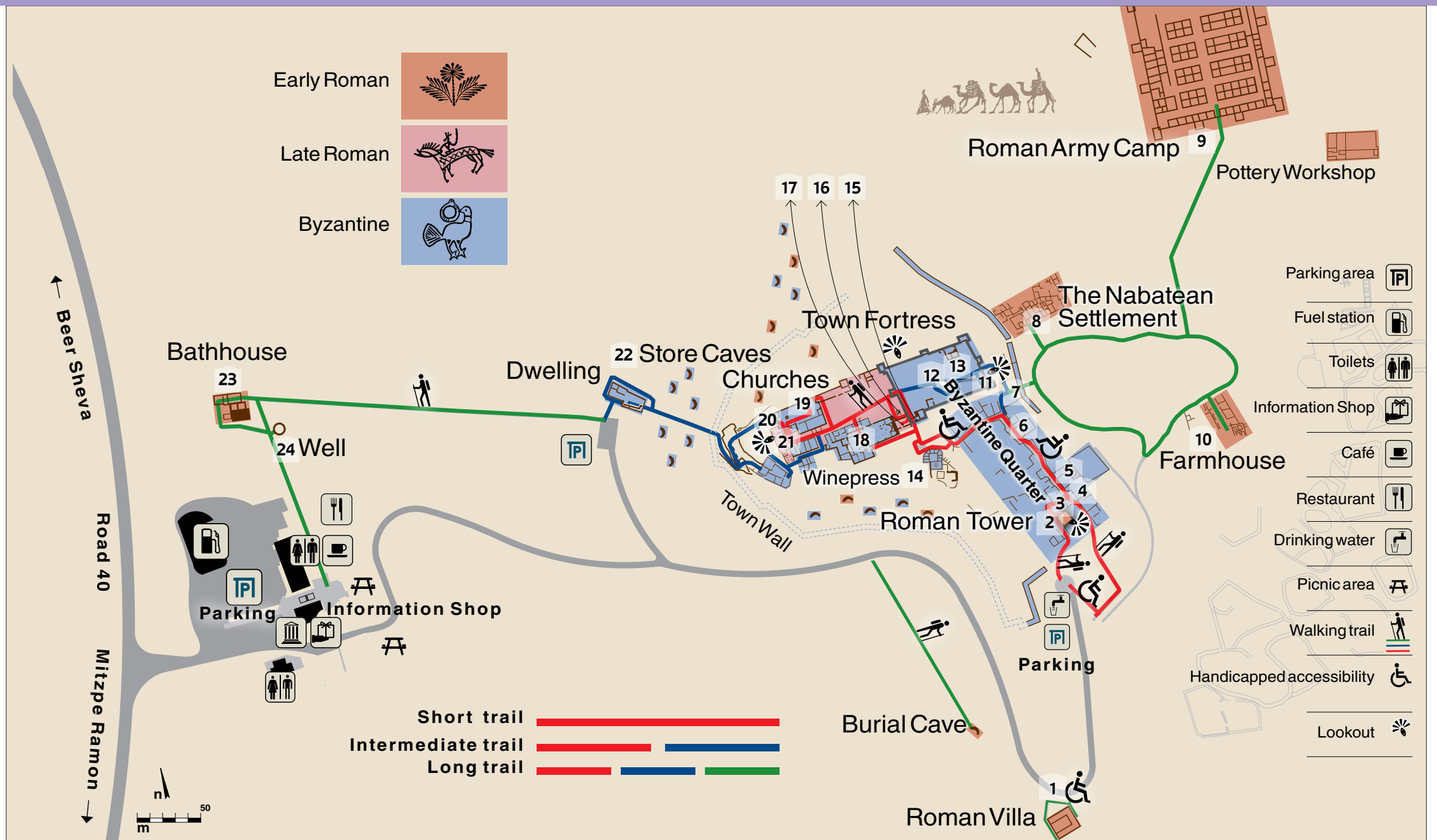


The North Church

Archaeological Excavations and Conservation at Avdat

- Avdat was uncovered by Prof. Michael Avi-Yonah in 1958 and by Prof. Avraham Negev from 1959 to 1961, under the auspices of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.
- Conservation and reconstruction were carried out here in the 1960s.
- From 1975 to 1977, Prof. Avraham Negev and Dr. Rudolph Cohen excavated the site.
- In 1989, Prof. Avraham Negev excavated the site on behalf of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.
- From 1990 to 1994, Ofer Katz, Gil Tahal, Tali Erickson-Gini and Peter Fabian excavated the site on behalf of the Israel Antiquities Authority.
- From 1999 to 2000 Tali Erickson-Gini and Peter Fabian excavated Avdat on behalf of the Israel Antiquities Authority.
- The Incense Route, including Avdat, was inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2005, together with Mamshit, Shivta and Halutza.
- On October 5, 2009, vandals destroyed remnants of the Byzantine settlement of Avdat, toppling, smashing and spray-painting buildings, vaults and columns. The Israel Nature and Parks Authority invested major resources in conservation, reconstruction and development of Avdat over the years. After the vandals struck, the Authority launched a restoration and conservation project with the assistance of the Israeli government, which allocated extensive funding to it. Work on the project continued for three years, under the direction of an Israel Nature and Parks Authority conservation team in cooperation with the Israel Antiquities Authority. Ruins were restored, archaeological remains conserved, new signage and interpretive elements were installed along the visitor route, along with a new security system to protect the site from further such incidents.





Touring Routes

- The short route:** From the upper parking lot to the Roman tower, the winepress and the lookout, the citadel and churches, and from there back to the upper parking lot (1–1.5 hours).
- The medium route:** From the upper parking lot to the Roman tower, winepress and lookout, citadel, churches, storage caves and Roman bathhouse, and from there to the lower parking lot (2 hours).
- The long route:** From the lower parking lot to the burial cave, Roman villa, Roman tower, Nabatean settlement, Roman army camp, farmhouse, winepress and lookout, citadel, churches, storage cave and Roman bathhouse, and from there back to the lower parking lot (3 hours).

The visit to Avdat begins and ends at the information shop, which invites visitors to get to know the Nabateans and the Incense Route through a film, artifacts, explanations and a model of Avdat in the Byzantine period.

As you drive from the lower parking lot to the site, you can stop and walk along a short path to a burial cave, which dates from the 3rd century CE and contains some 20 hewn burial niches. The decorated lintel and the names of women found on epitaphs in the cave, have led scholars to suggest that this was a women's tomb that may have been associated with the Temple of Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love.

Continue your drive, stopping to visit the remains of the Roman villa (1). There is no better place for a house – with a great view and pleasant breezes from the courtyard into the rooms.

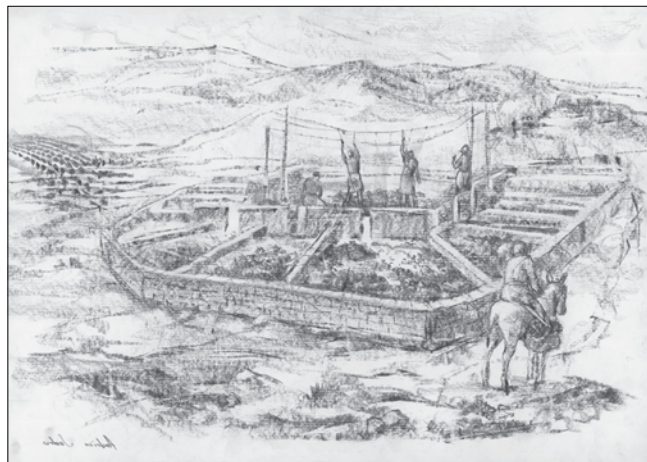
Continue driving until you reach the upper parking lot.

From the upper parking lot, walk to the Roman tower (2), which served as a lookout tower. The Greek inscription carved into the lintel reads: ““With good fortune Zeus Oboda, help Irenius who built this tower with good augers in the year 188 with the help of the architect Wailos of Petra and Avtichos.”

Who was this “Zeus Oboda”? To Avdat's inhabitants, their king (apparently Oboda II), after whom the city was named, was deified and likened to Zeus (the Greek god of the heavens). Years were counted from the establishment of Provincia Arabia in 106 CE, and therefore the year of the tower's construction is 294 CE.



The Roman villa



The reconstructed winepress

Next to the tower is the “vaulted room” (3), part of the Byzantine quarter. The arches, which bore stone roof slabs, were reconstructed during the conservation project after vandals tore them down in 2009.

From here, continue to the street in the Byzantine quarter (4), which was settled as early as the Late Roman period. Water, a precious resource, flowed from gutters to channels and cisterns. Notice the leaning arches (5) – evidence of the earthquake in the early 7th century CE, after which Avdat was abandoned. On the right and farther along are stables for horses (6).

At this point you'll want to decide how to continue: If you turn right (**the long route**) you'll be able to see the remains of the early Nabatean settlement, the Roman Tenth Legion army camp and the road up which camel caravans came, loaded with incense, spices, textiles and other luxury items. If you turn left (**the short route**), you'll skip these points.

The Long Route

Turn right at the Byzantine city wall (7) and continue to the remains of the Nabatean settlement (8) – this was station number 62 on the Incense Route (pre-dating the Byzantine city). In front of you to the east are remains of a Nabatean pottery workshop. From here continue to the Roman army camp (9), which served the soldiers of the Roman Tenth Legion, the legionary headquarters of which were in Aila (Aqaba).

Continue south to the remains of a winepress (10), the earliest such press anywhere in or near Avdat. The winepress was part of a Late Roman/Early Byzantine farmhouse. The valley at the foot of the town was planted with grapevines from which fine wine was made in this press. Looking south, you'll see a portion of the Incense Route ascending from the southeast, by which the caravans reached Avdat. Animals pens, whose remains you can see nearby, were where the caravans' camels rested. Continue to the eastern entrance to the Byzantine citadel and ascend its southeastern lookout tower (11). The view from here is spectacular: the Avdat plateau, the Incense Route, the Roman army camp and the remains of Avdat itself.

At the foot of the tower is a channel (13) through which rainwater flowed into a large cistern (12). Additional cisterns collected surface runoff in the vicinity.

From here, exit left through the southern gate of the citadel to view a second winepress and lookout. The grapes, treading here to produce wine, were grown at the foot of the city of Avdat.

From here, return to the citadel courtyard (15), and proceed westward into the temple precinct to view another Nabatean cistern (16) and the remains of a Nabatean temple (17). An inscription found nearby indicates that the Greek goddess of love and beauty, Aphrodite, the equivalent of the Nabatean goddess Uzza, was worshipped here, along with Zeus-Oboda and possibly the chief Nabatean god, Dushara. Excavation of the temple walls revealed colored decorations (molded stucco and frescos) common in Nabatean temples.

From the courtyard of the sacred precinct proceed left to the southern church (18) – the Church of St. Theodoros – which was part of a monastery. In the floor are a number of burials with marble slabs bearing inscriptions from 541–618 CE. The earliest inscription is incised on a grave in the Martyrium of St. Theodoros, hence the name of the church. In the church courtyard (the atrium) is a model of the building. From here, continue to the northern church (19), the earliest church at Avdat. You'll also see a reconstructed marble baptistery (20) built in the remains of a Nabataean temple. Exit via the temple gate (21). Nabatean inscriptions found on the lintel and dated to the 3rd century CE attest that this temple was dedicated to Zeus-Oboda. The dedication inscription carved in the lintel is dated to 268 CE and mentions names of dedicators and “all friends of Oboda”.

Opposite the temple gate is a lookout with information about the Incense Route.

From here, you can either return to the parking lot or descend the temple stairs to the caves. The caves were used as tombs during the period of the Nabatean settlement, while during the time of the Byzantine settlement they were used for dwellings, stables and monasteries, as well as for storing agricultural produce and fermenting wine. The caves were fronted by buildings (22).

Continue down to the Byzantine-period bathhouse (23), which was built in the 4th century by Roman soldiers. An adjacent well (24), 70 m deep, contained water that flowed through a channel to the bathhouse.



The Byzantine house and storerooms