

In King Herod's footsteps

By Yelena Kurdyumova and
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Ein Gedi Kibbutz is an hour and a half from Tel Aviv Airport, in the heart of the Judean Desert. But for those who had come to the 25th Dead Sea Half Marathon it didn't exactly look like a desert. The Kibbutz guest house lies within a botanical garden. It was started by kibbutz pioneers just 50 years ago on salty desert soil which gets only 50mm of rainfall a year. Now it contains over a thousand rare species, such as biblical myrrh and frankincense, African baobab, Sodom apple, 45 species of palms and an abundance of cacti.

We had come for the race, but as everywhere in Israel you can't get away from 5000 years of history. The oasis was mentioned in King David's Song of Songs. Jewish people lived in Ein Gedi village in biblical times. It was destroyed and rebuilt many times over the centuries but was uninhabited for 500 years before the founding of

hour away. Before or after the race runners can visit such historical and holy sites as the Church of Holy Sepulchre, the Via Dolorosa, the Church of Bethlehem, the Dome of the Rock, the Wailing Wall, and the new Holocaust History Museum and Memorial. If time or energy is limited, then the Qumran caves lie only half way to Jerusalem. This was where the oldest of all Biblical documents, the Dead Sea Scrolls, were found.

Alternatively, 20 minutes to the south, lies Mount Sodom, a 12km long ridge of pure salt, believed to be the infamous biblical city which perished together with Gomorra. Salt pillars remind us of Lot's wife who, according to biblical legend, turned into one of them when she looked back on the destruction of these two notorious cities. Stunning views of the Dead Sea and the Judean Desert open up from the top of the mountain.

The opening ceremony, the night before the race, showcased performances by local dancers and

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Kibbutz in 1956. Halfway between then and now the half marathon was started up.

At 400m below sea level the Dead Sea is the lowest place on Earth. It's a good place to race because the dry, crystal-clean air contains more oxygen (23%) than anywhere else in the world. The sun shines 330 days in the year but the air filters ultra-violet light and renders the sun's rays almost harmless, especially in winter. The unique climate relieves fatigue with its low humidity and high barometric pressure.

Apart from seeing ancient historical sites runners can also enjoy the healing elements of the Dead Sea water. The race start and finish is at Ein Gedi Spa where thermal (37-38C) sulphur springs and black mud are used to cleanse the body and relieve pain and tension – perhaps better after the race than before. The Dead 'Sea' is in fact a huge lake where nothing grows and no life is found due to its salt and mineral content, which is 10 times higher than the Mediterranean

Jerusalem, the capital of Israel and a place of pilgrimage for Christians, Jews and Muslims alike, is only an

singers. A documentary was shown dedicated to the memory of Giora and Tomer Ron, talented local runners who died young. Their father, Eli Ron, was one of the race founders 25 years ago and remains actively involved today.

At the start 2000 runners from 12 countries and the UN Forces gathered for the half marathon, a 10km race, and a kid's run. Even at 08.30 it was 23C as the 10km run and walk set off to orchestral accompaniment. The half marathon followed 45 minutes later, along the sea shore course to a turn-around point near Masada National Park.

Masada is Israel's second most renowned site, after the Via Dolorosa. Built by King Herod in the 1st century BC, atop an isolated mountain, Masada was a palatial fortress in the ancient Roman style. The camps, fortifications and assault ramp at its base are the most complete example of a Roman siege system that survives anywhere in the world. In the first century AD it became the eternal symbol of Jewish history as the last stand of a group of rebels who chose death instead of surrendering to Roman slavery.





PHOTO: OREL HERSHCOVITCH

Kenya's Stanley Kibet Kessio led from the start, ahead of Admasu Gebre, who was in turn followed by a pack of several Israeli runners, all Ethiopian by origin, and 21-year old Ethiopian Yonas Nagatu. After the turn around point runners faced a head wind, and 3km long ascent. Gebre closed on Kessio and took the lead. By 17km he was 300m ahead as behind him Asaf Bimro surged out of the pack to pass Kessio and go into second place.

Beza Nebaba, another native Ethiopian Israeli citizen, recorded a personal best and the fifth fastest time in the world for a blind runner (1:32:48). He only started training two years ago, and hopes to run the marathon at the Beijing Paralympics.

Youth overcame experience in the women's race as Dagne Balcha Kalkidan outran Nili Avramsky, the defending champion. Kalkidan passed 5km in 17:38, 150m ahead, but from 13km Avramsky narrowed the gap slightly to limit Kalkidan's winning margin to 43 seconds.

The 10km race was dominated by Israeli athletes. Nina Pekerman, national triathlon champion won in 38:57, while Goseph Gizacho, another former Ethiopian, took the men's title in 32:47.

At the finish line runners were met by the orchestra and refuge from the sun under the huge tent stretched above the marathon expo. Free massage and admission to the Ein Gedi Spa, with its thermal pools

of sulfurous water and therapeutic mud, assisted their recovery.

A truly popular event, the race brings runners together from many parts of the world to promote sport

and peace. "If everybody does sports more... it will take the focus from politics to different places"- said Nili Avramsky, after she had completed the race for the 16th time.

MEN:

1	Nile Admasu GEBRE	ETH	1:06:52
2	Asaf BIMRO	ISR	1:08:08
3	Zavadia WUDEGE	ISR	1:08:52
4	Dastau SONAH	ISR	1:09:00
5	Stanley Kibet KESSIO	KEN	1:09:08
6	Yonas NEGATU	ETH	1:11:29
7	Hai NOAM	ISR	1:18:42
8	Omry HOLTSMAN	ISR	1:18:44
9	Dan STEFTER	ISR	1:19:59
10	Sharon LURYE	ISR	1:20:26

WOMEN

1	Dagne Balcha KALKIDAN	ETH	1:18:07
2	Nili AVRAMSKI	ISR	1:18:50
3	Svetlana BAHMAND	ISR	1:19:39
4	Orna BLAU	ISR	1:26:47
5	Loris MENDELOVICH	ISR	1:28:37
6	Sasi BENTAL	ISR	1:33:26
7	Lila FRANKEL	ISR	1:33:32
8	Christoph TOGGENBURGH	ISR	1:34:41
9	Jessica MISIIONISHNIK	ISR	1:38:09
10	Maria DIAS	ISR	1:38:39

RACE CONTACT DETAILS**DEAD SEA HALF MARATHON, FEBRUARY**

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Full race contact listings start on page 70