

The Jewish Quarter

The current Jewish Quarter, which today looks almost brand new and usually sparkling clean, dates to roughly 1400. The oldest synagogues — the Elijah the Prophet and Yohanan Ben Zakkai — are roughly 400 years-old. These synagogues are below street level because at the time they were built Jews and Christians were prohibited from building anything higher than the Muslim structures.

In the main plaza, an arch stretches skyward where one of the walls of the Hurva Synagogue once stood. Originally the Great Synagogue, the Hurva was built in the 16th century, but was destroyed by the Ottomans. The synagogue was rebuilt in the 1850's, but was damaged in the 1948 war and then destroyed after the Jordanians took control of the Old City. Some consideration has been given to rebuilding the synagogue, but, for now the arch remains as a memorial. Nearby is the Ramban Synagogue, named for Rabbi Moshe Ben-Nahman — the Ramban — who helped rejuvenate the Jewish community in Jerusalem in 1267, after it had been wiped out by the Crusaders.

Just off the plaza is the Cardo, which was a Byzantine road, roughly the equivalent of an eight-lane highway that ran through the heart of the city. Today, a small area is preserved with some of the original Roman columns. Just beyond the columns is an underground mall with a number of Jewish stores and art galleries. This is a good place to purchase Judaica, and it is possible to haggle with shopkeepers. Compare the prices with the shops downtown before you buy.



The Jewish Quarter of today is located on the remains of the upper city from the Herodian period (37 B.C.E-70 C.E.). The Wohl Archaeological Museum contains what are now the underground remains of a residential quarter where wealthy families belonging to the Jerusalem aristocracy and priesthood constructed homes overlooking the Temple Mount. Some archaeologists believe the palace of the Hasmoneans (also known as the Maccabees) is among the ruins.

Two gates lead into the Jewish Quarter. One, just outside the Western Wall plaza, is the Dung Gate. The other is Zion Gate. If you want to bypass most of the tourists, take the path from Yemin Moshe down the hill, across Jaffa Road and up the snake path along the wall to Zion Gate. This was the last gate constructed (in 1540), probably because Mount Zion was inadvertently let outside the city walls. In Arabic it is known as "the Prophet David's Gate" because it faces Mount Zion where David is supposed to be buried. Like other fortress gates, this was built in an L-shape to prevent armies on horseback from charging through the entrance. Today, you only have to worry about cars charging through. (Source: www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org)

The Hurva Synagogue at the Jewish Quarter:

