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Northern Exposé

Why the Galilee and Golan Heights -- yes, Golan Heights -- offer foodies a table of contents

September 07, 2011 - Elyse Glickman, Jewish Exponent Feature

If there is any truism that applies to the Golan Heights and Galilee, it is, "Don't judge a book by its cover."

The Galilee has a reputation as a tourism-and-pilgrimage hub, with attractions that include Tiberius, Capernaum and the Mount of Beatitudes.

The Golan Heights, regrettably, often gets press for political turmoil and border skirmishes. Even with preconceptions established by location and history, however, Northern Israel is a rich, verdant and radiant region with much to offer everybody, including foodies, art and architecture buffs, and outdoors-y types.



Photos by Elyse Glickman

Though the idyllic Pausa (www.pausa-inn.co.il; translatable into English) recently counted National Public Radio and a variety of top international news services as guests during the Lebanon conflict five years ago (with one reporter deftly commenting that it was the best place to stay in wartime), it is best known locally as a bastion of sanity, creativity and intellectual conversation that start at owners Avigdor and Einat Rothem's dinner table.

It also should not come as a surprise that Avigdor is the local chairman of the international Slow Food movement, especially given that most of what goes on at their table comes from the compact (one acre) but diverse and fertile gardens surrounding the property.

Quality meats and wines are sourced from local providers. To give the guests an idea of the home-grown pleasures that await them, the Rothems present them on arrival with a glass of their lemoncello, made from lemons grown on their property.

"Though we, of course, take guests' dietary concerns into consideration, every day our

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menu is fixed and prepared," explains Avigdor. "We like to eat things that are sourced as close to our property as possible, supporting local businesses, and creating a lower carbon footprint."

"People who come here come to enjoy watching classic movies on our lawn, taking cooking and art workshops and stimulating, grown-up conversations over a carefully prepared dinner."

Even though Pausa is a short drive from many of the Golan's top wineries, prime hiking and the Mt. Hermon Ski Resort, one of the biggest treats with a Pausa stay is Avigdor taking you on a tour of the grounds after a lavish and exquisitely arrayed breakfast.

When you visit Ilan Roberg's signature restaurant (www.roberg.co.il; offered in Hebrew only) in the Jewish village of Livnim, you are -- literally -- part of the family.



Ilan Roberg and the slice-of-life style practiced at his well-regarded gourmet restaurant in Livnim

Besides the fact that this restaurant will have you completely craving Roberg's take on kosher food, there is a good chance you will be able to recreate the experience at home with your own family.

At Roberg's chef's table, you can watch Ilan and his adult children demonstrate the right way to prepare a traditional Israeli herb salad and then update it with sushi-grade tuna and Asian seasoning.

Although there are glorious views of the Sea of Galilee and nearby mountain ranges, you may be just as captivated by flat screen TVs that show the different courses of your meal coming together, step by step.

Though Ilan Roberg trained Israeli army chefs to feed the troops well, and had stints at upscale hotels like the Sheraton Tiberius, he views his restaurant's concept not as gourmet food, but well-prepared kosher food in a family setting.

While Muscat, the acclaimed restaurant of Mizpe Hayamim (www.mizpe-hayamim.com/Muscat_Restaurant) in Rosh Pina, is chef-driven, the rest of the resort definitely has a hands-on approach for its guests as well as its day-to-day maintenance.

Founded in 1923, it is a forerunner to the modern spa resort experience. As it exists today, the resort balances the timeless (1,000 meters of organic hotel garden and fields with livestock, and views of Mt. Hermon and Galilee) with the new (age).

Guests will also be enchanted by personalities like resident artist Sara Shoval, a 65-year-old former dancer who lives her passion through the art work, art class instruction, garden walks and body work -- spa -- services she provides for hotel guests.

"If you can dance, you can sculpt. If you can sculpt, you can draw, and if you can draw you can write -- and move on to new things though your life," she says.

Speaking of moving on, ambitious travelers will discover not all treasures and great discoveries are buried within, and the ancient city of Tzfat, the highest community in Israel, reflects this.



The compact city is packed with charming narrow streets, historic landmarks, synagogues, jewelry salons and galleries, such as the Gallery of Mystical Art and Safed Candles.

The 360-degree views from the nearby Villa Galilee Boutique Hotel (english.villa-galilee.com) are epic. However, pair them with Victorian manor-house appointments, a fresh-from-the-farm breakfast spread, vibrant floral landscaping and a nicely situated pool and what you end up with is a literal piece of heaven.

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