

## HISTORY COMES ALIVE



A trained equestrian gets ready to joust on horseback. Who will be protector of Acre? (Arye Tzadok)

A new initiative to recreate Crusader life amid the ruins hopes to attract massive tourism to Acre



Hoisting the pennant. (Yachatz)

# BRINGING THE CRUSADER PERIOD TO LIFE

• By ORIT ARFA

The year is 1191, and King Richard the Lionheart is seeking his knight in shining armor to protect Acre, the coveted port city he just secured from the hands of the Muslim ruler Saladin. As he sets out to liberate Jerusalem, he has gathered three brave knights – one from England, one from France and one from Spain – to show off their horseback prowess at the Acre Hippodrome, a stadium for equestrian knights. The most able will be crowned the protector of Acre. No, this didn't really happen, at least not back then. It happened in the year of 2015, in a makeshift hippodrome located on a moat of the Crusader Hospitaller Fortress in the Old City of Acre, where the military, monastic order of the Third Crusades had set up their headquarters in the 12th and 13th centuries to maintain the safety of the Holy Land pilgrims. Trained equestrians joust on horseback, sometimes to rock music by Queen, to a series of challenges that tested their equestrian skill and coordination, as the crowd, split up into national teams, cheered.

The enactment of this historical fictional tale is the centerpiece of an ambitious, new initiative of the city of Acre. It consists of a dinner and show in which performers and equestrians recreate a festive Crusader feast and a tournament of knights to showcase the rich medieval history of what is one of the oldest cities in the world. Ready in time for Christmas, the "Knights' Banquet" is now being offered every Tuesday and Thursday evening, and the Tourism Ministry and city officials hope this interactive extravaganza will entice local and foreign tourists to the historical, cultural and culinary treasures of a city that is sometimes overlooked as a tourist destination. At the launch last week, hundreds of guests sat cafeteria style in the Crusader's refectory, the Magnificent Hall, for a mock Crusader feast and a medieval royal procession. Arab and Jewish actors from the Acre Theater Center playing court jesters, knights and fair maidens served the regal meal as they dramatized a Crusader narrative light on history and heavy on kitsch, but altogether making for a memorable, family-oriented experience. Fire and belly dancers embellished the escapade with



Guests in the Magnificent Hall enjoy a mock Crusader feast of 'poor man's food.' (Alexander Dvorak)

entertainment that would have probably made the Hospitallers blush. The menu was created by Haifa chef Eitan Kiesler and consisted of lentil soup, a vegetable platter, saffron roasted chicken legs, potatoes and candied apple dessert. Beer and wine were served in jugs, and forks and knives were absent, since the Crusaders ate without utensils. "It was poor man's food," said Kiesler, who researched foods of the Middle Ages while using raw materials and herbs indigenous to the Land of Israel – foods that would have been within the Crusaders' reach. Whether or not this is exactly how and what the Crusaders ate, merely sitting in the architectural, pillared wonder is like sitting in a time machine that takes one back to that period. "Through many years of work, research and planning, we have built a tourism site to give many options to tourists," Amir Halevi, director-general of the Tourism Ministry, told *Metro* at the launch. For the more accurate history of the Crusades in the Land of Israel, as well as the history of Acre under its varied rulers, spend the day at the elab-

orate, finely executed and curated exhibition that runs throughout the awe-inspiring ruins of the Hospitaller Fortress and culminates in an artist's square in the Pillars Hall where local craftsmen sell their wares. The well-written placards, creative placement of the displays and creative lighting attest to the multimillion dollar investment by the Old Acre Development Company. According to Dudu Harari, the company's CEO, over NIS 641 million has been invested in Acre in the last 20 years. While the company was founded in 1967, it was only in 1993 that city leaders decided to make the revival of Acre a priority. "Since Acre has no resources – gold, silver or gas – and since the people were at a lower-socioeconomic status, we thought of how to transform the city. We had to make it an international tourism site," Harari told *Metro*. In 2001, Acre was named by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site. According to Michael Skir, a licensed tour guide among the guests at the launch, the investment has paid off. Whereas he once skipped Acre in favor of Caesarea and Haifa, he now intends to bring more

groups, particularly Christians, to Acre. Christians, he said, generally prefer visiting sites where the life of Jesus played out. "The Crusader period doesn't speak to the tourists who come to Israel," Skir said. "There's nothing Christian here, but now there is a show, hotels, a feast, so the package is more attractive." **What else to do and eat in Acre** With its golden, stone walls and alleyways, the Old City of Acre maintains an antique charm akin to the charm of Jerusalem's Old City. In fact, Acre and Jerusalem were sister cities during the Crusader kingdom. Acre served as political and administrative capital of the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem and was the Crusaders' foothold in the Holy Land, allowing for the shipment of cargo to and from Christian Europe. Within the delightful Arab souk, famous for its hummus, is the Turkish bazaar. This 18th-century Ottoman marketplace has been transformed into a thoroughfare for boutiques and quaint, modern eateries that have contributed to Acre's growing reputation as a culinary destination. These

include Sevida, a fish restaurant serving a fixed menu for NIS 100 based on the catch of the day; Kukushka, a seafood snack bar; and Dalal, a tapas bar. Also paying homage to the Turkish influence in the city is al-Basha Turkish Bath, an actual Turkish bath made into a museum on the art of Turkish bathing. From the Hospitaller compound, walk through the Crusader tunnel to get to the Ghattas Turkish Hamam for a modern-day *hamam* (bath) and spa experience. For a fun harbor experience, find one of the many Arab "yacht" operators at the wharf, and for anywhere from NIS 10 to NIS 50, enjoy a boat ride to get a glimpse of what Napoleon might have seen as he set sail to attempt to conquer the walled city. Plenty of restaurants blending modern and Arab cuisine overlook the marina for a sunset dining experience. Even as tensions have risen between Arabs and Jews since the recent outbreak of violence in the streets of Jerusalem, Acre has largely remained a haven for coexistence, with tourism serving as a glue that cements Muslim-Jewish ties. Acre's Arab population, said Harari, seek to ensure a safe environment for tourists. "It affects their livelihood," he said.

**Where to stay** The Knight's Youth Hostel and Guest House provides more than just affordable rooms for tourists. Only about a year-and-a-half old, the massive stone structure also houses archeological remains and is considered one of the best hostels in Israel. The elegant, luxurious Efendi Hotel, restored from homes once owned by the Ottoman elite, has been drawing today's elite to Acre and is raising the standards of hospitality in the city. It was founded by local mover and shaker Uri Jeremias, also the chef and proprietor of the legendary Uri Buri seafood restaurant in Acre. Hotels along the shore in the "new city," such as Rimonim, are options for groups and visitors. But these days, you may also just want to look up a place on Airbnb, because often what's best about Acre are those hidden places that you need to excavate. *For tickets to the Knights' Banquet, call (04) 995-6708/3. Cost is NIS 200 through the box office, and the show is available in both English and Hebrew.*