

ENJOYING WINE together with family, friends or like-minded tourists is the highlight of every wine tour. (Assaf Winery)



THE GOLAN WINE EXPERIENCE



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

The wine-growing region that first drew attention to Israeli wines was the Golan Heights. Its high elevation, volcanic soil and black basalt stone was considered perfect for growing grapes with the potential to make high-quality wine.

The Golan Heights Winery carried not only the wine hopes of the region, but the whole country. New World winemaking technology, the idea of making wine in the vineyards and the introduction of new varieties made this the pioneering winery.

The close association between winery and growing region encouraged the winery to promote “The Land of Wine,” referring to the Golan. Today there are 20 wineries on the Golan Heights ranging from Château Golan in the southern Golan to Mount Odem in the North. There are numerous bed & breakfasts and guesthouses. There are things to do, places to see, activities for children and young families, and also for active seniors who have seen everything.

I particularly love to explore the rich Jewish history of the Golan. There are numerous old synagogues there. In fact, about a quarter of all the ancient synagogues found in Israel are situated on the Golan. I can certainly recommend the Katzrin Talmudic Village and the Gamla archaeological site. Best of all may be the relatively new reconstructed site of Ein Keshatot. Amazingly, the structure was rebuilt stone by stone with the use of 3D imaging technology.

I believe the Golan Heights is a tourism treasure. It is situated in northeast of Israel overlooking the Sea of Galilee, and overlooked by the snow-covered Mount Hermon. It is a strip roughly 65 km. long and 20 km. wide. You arrive there and are immediately confronted by a quietness and tranquility that make it feel as though you are abroad. It is like turning the sound off. You climb sharply from the Sea of Galilee area, where bananas are grown, to the coolest agricultural area in Israel, where apples, vines and cherries thrive. You leave the frenetic, non-stop Israel behind. There are numerous places to stay. Take your pick. I myself have experience of Assaf Winery’s Kedem Wine Village near Kidmat Zvi in the heart of wine country, and Cnaan Village Spa in Had Ness, overlooking the Sea of Galilee.

Both are heartily recommended.

My love affair with the Golan is an all-year affair. In the winter and spring it is wonderfully green. Water abounds everywhere. You can follow the water from the beautiful Baniyas Nature Reserve, passing numerous reservoirs, and hop from waterfall to waterfall. If you visit only one, it should be the Gamla waterfall, which is the most spectacular. In the summer, the Golan is slightly cooler than the hot and humid coastal area, and autumn is the time of the harvest. Enjoy hiking among the cattle and horses, and I am not giving away a secret when I tell you a vineyard is the perfect spot for a picnic.

THE GOLAN is covered in vineyards, and the Golan Heights is most famous for its wine. Six of the main wineries have combined to produce a wine route. Each contributes something different to the mosaic of Golan wine. The magnificent, slightly regal Château Golan, with its grand, pillared, soft-lighting cellar is worth a visit. It is situated in Moshav Eliad in the southern Golan. The winemaker here, Uri Hetz, is an instinctive artist and individualist. His wines are individual expressions of his worldview and of his own vineyards.



BEAUTIFULLY FURNISHED cabins in the Kedem Wine Village. (Assaf Winery)

THE VISITORS center of the Golan Heights Winery: Step into Napa Valley. (Golan Heights Winery)



GOLAN HEIGHTS Winery's Yarden Cabernet Sauvignon 2015. (Golan Heights Winery)

LEFT: CHÂTEAU Golan Merlot 2014. (Château Golan)



He is a pioneer of the so-called Mediterranean varieties. His Geshem blends are excellent, but he also produces a high-quality Sauvignon Blanc, a great Syrah and his Eliad is a truly fine wine, with concentration and balance. Château Golan (non-kosher) is without doubt one of Israel's finest boutique wineries.

Next on the list would be the Golan Heights Winery (kosher), the king of the castle. This winery has shaped wine in Israel, and every winery on the Golan has developed under its shadow. The Golan Heights Winery has won awards at the very highest level for sparkling, white, red and dessert wines, showing great versatility and a level of international quality that it has maintained over 30 years. The visitors center will make you think of Napa Valley. The winery offers wines at every price point, from Mount Hermon Red, the country's largest-selling wine, to Yarden Katzrin, arguably the grandest of all the prestige, deluxe wines in Israel. Here the tour is a must, describing the wine-growing and wine-making process and the tasting. The guides are experienced and are able to take you inside the skin of Golan wine country. Lesser-known wines worth tasting are the Gamla Sangiovese and the Yarden Pinot Gris.

Bazelet Hagolan (kosher) is situated at Moshav Kidmat Zvi. This winery is owned by Yoav Levy. The

wines are rich, round, voluptuous, full of fruit and mouth-filling flavor. These are probably the most "New World" of the Golan's wines. The Cabernet Sauvignon is his calling card, and he has a great Chardonnay. I like the area. Woods and horses set the scene before you see his beautiful cellar.

Assaf Winery (non-kosher) is also at Kidmat Zvi. This is owned by the Kedem family. Wine grower Assaf Kedem founded his winery and had the vision to create Israel's first wine village, which is a family-run operation. Stylish, beautifully fitted cabins, delicious homemade food and its central location make this the perfect place to stay, or for a pit stop. The winery specializes in varieties Assaf learned about in South Africa, including Chenin Blanc and Pinotage. The Rujum 91 is also worth a detour. Assaf Kedem is a wine tourism pioneer not just of the Golan, but of Israel.

At Kibbutz Ein Zivan, overlooking Quneitra, you will find Pelter Winery (non-kosher). This was founded by Nir and Tal Pelter in 2001. The wines are sourced from all over Israel and are extremely popular in Israeli restaurants. My favorites are the clean, mineral whites like Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay and Chenin Blanc. The place shows a relaxed, laid-back atmosphere of a non-kosher winery that has outgrown itself. Here you can lean on a barrel without incurring the wrath

and concern of kosher supervisors. Home-produced goat's cheese, olive oil and artisan spirits produced in an authentic pot still are available. There is also the Pelter-owned Matar Winery on the same premises, but it is closed off to preserve its kosher status.

TASTING WINE in the place it is made, possibly with the person who made it, is always a special experience. However, you can better that if you can drink a wine in the vineyard where its grapes are grown. It is always worthwhile visiting a vineyard or two because it adds context, and only then will you truly understand the Golan terroir.

The Avital Vineyard inside the crater of an inactive volcano is always a great and original place for a group photo. Alternatively, Bar'on Vineyard is a great one to visit. It is immaculately kept, with a great view of Mount Hermon. Most important, it showcases the pioneering sustainability program of the Golan Heights Winery, whose viticulture technology is among the most advanced in the world. There is even a hut and table for a picnic lunch. If you can arrange an explanation, don't hesitate – go for it!

The northernmost winery in Israel is the Odem Mountain Winery (kosher). It is situated in Moshav Odem and was founded by Michael and Idit Alfasi. This is a homey winery situated 1,100 meters above sea level, considerably closer to Mount Hermon, in the heart of an oak forest. Their son is now the winemaker, though Michael is quick to say he is "first a grower, and only second a winemaker." The wines show individuality and character, and their Volcani wines are good value. Don't miss the opportunity to taste their dessert wines, which are excellent.

I suggest you always book in advance to avoid disappointment. You will need to appoint a designated driver, or hire a minibus. A jeep tour is a fun way of experiencing the terrain. Realistically, I suggest visiting three wineries in a day. Then you can have in-depth visits, time for lunch, toilet breaks and so on. The worst thing is filling the program so it looks good on paper, but realistically it often is just not practical. Count on every visit taking longer than planned. You will be tasting quite a few wines. Remember, you can taste and not drink every drop. It is OK to spit. Use the spittoons at your disposal. If you are picnicking and want to chill a wine, either dangle it in one of the streams or wrap the bottle in wet newspaper and one of the passengers can hold it out of the window when driving.

The best recommendation is to eat a good breakfast and miss a formal lunch. There are some good Druze eateries in the northern Golan, and some people open their houses for home cooking. If not, save yourselves for a grand evening dinner. The Magdalena Restaurant on the other side of the Kinneret near Migdal is one of the finest restaurants in the country. It also has a very good wine list. If you want the total Golan experience, I recommend Moshbutz Restaurant at Ramot. They offer meat, beer, wine and spirits from the Golan. I love the idea of a regional wine list.

The Golan Wine Route will allow you to experience the Golan Heights as a destination full of content, brimming with potential for the Israeli or incoming tourist... and the best way to enjoy the Golan is through the perspective of its vineyards, wineries and wines. ■

The writer has advanced Israeli wine for over 30 years and has been referred to as the English voice of Israeli wines. adammontefiore.com