

Jeffrey Galler

Exploring Underwater in Caesarea, Israel

Octavio's slave, Ishmael, bent over his pottery wheel, keenly aware that he was being observed by his master. His strong, clay-stained fingers shaped the pot quickly and skillfully. He had long ago abandoned his habit of adorning his pots with elegantly shaped necks and ornate handles.

"How many times do I have to tell you," Octavio had often warned him, "I want strong, cheap pots for shipping cargo. Fancy-looking amphora take longer to make and break too easily en route!"

All in all, Ishmael considered as the pot spun beneath his fingers, that he didn't have it so bad here in Rome. He was good at what he did and the work was not that difficult. He could have had it much worse. He knew that many of his countrymen had been sold into slavery for backbreaking, dangerous work constructing the giant port at Caesarea.

He appreciated that his master had explained to him the significance of his labors. These pots would carry 60 liters of valuable merchandise from port to port along the Mediterranean. Otavio even took the time to explain the economics of merchant shipping.

“See here,” Octavio had lectured, “It’s true that only two out of five of my trading ships will return safely. But I can load 3000 of these pots into a ship’s cargo hold, for the 10-day trip from Caesarea to Rome. Traveling by land would require a huge caravan of 750 camels three months to carry an equal amount of merchandise from the great warehouses in Caesarea to Rome. And, Ishmael, you have no idea how much a camel can eat!”

“No,” smiled Octavio, “I’ll take merchant ships over camels every time! And,” he patted Ishmael’s shoulders, “your pots will carry cargo that will make me quite wealthy!”

As Ishmael placed his completed handiwork to dry on the wood platform behind him, he idly wondered what fabulous merchandise would fill that pot. Would it be spice from Yemen? Frankincense and myrrh from the Far East? Or, perhaps, incredibly valuable and expensive salt from the salt mountains around the Dead Sea?

Perhaps Ishmael would have been disappointed to learn that this particular pot would never make it back to the home port. He would have been absolutely flabbergasted, however, to see the absolute elation and joy that I felt when I found a fragment of his broken handiwork while diving and exploring the sunken port of Caesarea.

Along with famed underwater photographer, Itamar Grinberg, I spent several enjoyable days immersed in history, exploring the ancient port city of Caesarea, above and below the water. Caesarea is located on Israel's Mediterranean coast, halfway between the major, modern cities of Tel Aviv and Haifa.

In order to fully appreciate and enjoy diving in the ancient harbor, it helps to first understand its history.

Two thousand years ago, the Kingdom of Judea was a tiny strip of land on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean. This narrow coast was of enormous significance in ancient times because it was a major trade route linking the three continents of Europe, Africa, and Asia.

Commercial shipping was extremely hazardous in this region, because prevailing southwest winds, along with a strong current flowing north, caused many ships to be lost. In 10 B.C., in a remarkable feat of engineering, King Herod completed an enormous, deep-water port, the largest in the ancient world, in the middle of a 40-mile stretch of inhospitable coastline, that was devoid of any natural safe haven for shipping.

He named the port and city Caesarea, in honor of the Roman Emperor, Augustus Caesar. The port could accommodate 100 ships, and was used

extensively until a major earthquake leveled the city and sank the port several hundred years later.

Shimon Kushner, owner of the Old Caesarea Diving Center (internet - www.info-net.co.il, telephone – 06-626-5898) briefed us before our first dive, and explained that underwater archeologists, since the 1960's, have been unearthing the remains of Herod's port. Other ancient ports cannot be readily explored either because they are still in active use like the Port of Athens, or because they have been converted to new uses like Rome's airport.

Diving the Underwater Port

Shimon introduced us to Ido Raban, our dive guide. He provided us with waterproof, underwater maps of the sunken port. Before boarding the dive boat, he showed us that the entire outline of the sunken port's 1200 foot outer breakwater walls was clearly visible from land, as a huge, semi-circular arc extending outward from shore.

With a maximum depth of 40 feet, we enjoyed hours of relaxed underwater exploring. It was fun following our map around the dive site.

On our first dive, we explored the west and northwest sections of the port. These areas were marked as no. 20 through 25 on our underwater map. We swam around huge blocks of stone, which were part of the port's

breakwater. Some of the sections were as large as 50 feet long, 18 feet wide, and 10 feet high.

Archaeologists speculate that blocks of a concrete mixture, used by the ancient builders, were floated out on wooden barges, and then deliberately sunk, in pre-designated positions. Our dive guide scooped away sand covering the base of some of these concrete blocks, to expose wood. These wooden sections, dated by scientists as 2000 years old, were clearly visible to us on the sea floor.

Some of the concrete blocks were dissolving with age and getting porous. We could peer into a crack on the side of a block and see light pouring inside from a multitude of irregular cracks and openings.

Before the port collapsed in a giant earthquake, these concrete blocks were part of a massive structure, called a mole, that formed the protective breakwater and pier of King Herod's harbor.

The wreckage of several ill-fated ships was strewn all over. Ballast rocks, concrete slabs, and spilled rubble was all around us.

Back on shore, Shimon and Ido had told me that many shards of broken pottery were often visible on the ocean floor, especially at section number 25, the western-most portion of our dive. I had been hoping to be lucky enough to find an interesting relic there.

Sure enough, when I caught a glimpse of an irregular-looking object sticking out of the sand, I quickly swooped down and picked up a nice souvenir: I had found the top of a broken amphora, with the pot's opening and slender neck relatively intact.

Clutching my "treasure" to my BC, I completed the dive. I was smiling so broadly, that I was surprised that I was able to keep the regulator in my mouth.

From the moment I found my pottery "treasure," I imagined myself back in King Herod's time, with Roman ships plowing through the Mediterranean, their cargo holds filled with ancient trading goods.

Back on the dive boat, I was snapped back to the reality of the 21st Century: several divers were on their cell phones. One was discussing a deal with a New York real estate agent, while another was discussing dinner arrangements with his wife back at the hotel.

This is the reality of Israel today: the juxtaposition of the very ancient with the ultra-modern.

When I got back to the dock, Shimon admired my "find" and immediately took me to the Citadel Gallery Shop of Nissim Abbou (P.O. Box 1154, Caesarea, Israel; Tel. 06-636-2950;). Mr. Abbou confirmed that

my fragment was approximately 2000 years old, but was only of below average quality. (“What does he know about quality?” I quietly seethed.)

He went on to explain that, as one of only very few licensed and authorized dealers of antiquities in Israel, he could legally sell me any of the many ancient artifacts for sale in his shop. He warned that in other countries, such as Italy, Greece, or Turkey, any attempt to take home such souvenirs could result in a prison sentence.

Tornado Boat Ride

From the antique shop, we went down the road to a beautiful stretch of beach at the Kef Yam Tourist Center, for a very thrilling, high-speed scenic motor boat ride around Caesarea. The 10-passenger boats, called Tornados, have 70 hp engines and travel at 45 knots.

As we sped through the water, we were able to get a terrific offshore view of the city and port. The guide stopped periodically to point out interesting structures being restored by archeologists, such as the ancient Herodian Amphitheater that accommodated an audience of 10,000, the King’s Palace, and the Hippodrome (Circus) where 30,000 fans could watch gladiators and chariot races.

Here, too, the contrast between ancient and modern Israel became very apparent. One moment, we were admiring the intact remains of a 13-

mile long Roman Aqueduct that brought water from Mt. Carmel to Caesarea, and the next we were speeding through the offshore stanchions and bridge supports of Israel's largest, ultra-modern electric generating plant.

The following morning, I left the modern luxury of the Hotel Dan Carmel-Haifa behind, and prepared for another day of archeological diving.

Back in the Water

On subsequent dives, we were able to explore the southern section of the port. There, two notable sections were especially interesting.

Section no. 12 was the site of a shipwreck, called the "Marble Carrier." In 18 feet of water, large, blocks of marble are strewn about, and piled next to each other. In addition, part of the ship's cargo was, apparently, coffins: two coffins are clearly visible.

At Section no. 13, we were able to see a remarkable assortment of ancient anchors. While many anchors were salvaged by archaeologists and are on display on shore, some were placed at this site, which is dubbed the "Garden of Anchors."

Among the anchors in this underwater museum, are a single-holed stone anchor, approximately 4000 years old, two-holed rectangular anchors, triangular anchors with wooden sticks that dig into the sand, a lead and

wood Greek anchor, an iron anchor from Roman times, and several Arabian anchors with curved arms and a long iron shaft.

On one occasion, we were allowed to dive with working archeologists. We watched as they painstakingly cleared debris with long compressed-air hoses, and removed large objects for further study.

Many salvaged items are on display at the neighboring Sdot Yam Museum of Caesarean Antiquities.

Jeep Tour in the Desert

Because I couldn't dive on the day before flying, the last day of my trip was spent seeking adventure in the 110 degree Fahrenheit Dead Sea Valley, 1300 feet below sea level. I found that my jeep tour of the desert was the perfect continuation and culmination of my underwater explorations at the sunken port of Caesarea.

Alan, my desert guide, started my tour by sitting me down in the shade of a rock outcropping and pointing out a large, salt mountain. He asked me to try and imagine the fabulous wealth that this area had once generated.

Salt had been as valuable as gold, and great empires had been built upon the mining and transporting of salt from these quarries to the

Mediterranean coast. Salt was a form of monetary exchange, and the word “salary” is derived from the word “salt.”

I thought back to the fragment of pot that I had found while diving in Caesarea, and spent a long time wondering if it had once been filled with salt from this very quarry.

Alan told me that this entire area is the center of major tectonic shifting, with 400 extremely minor earthquakes occurring annually. Every so often a major earthquake, like the recent one in Turkey, occurs.

As evidence of these earthquakes, he showed me cracks on the ceilings of caves and on sheer rock faces. He showed me that straight-as-an-arrow parallel striations on rock faces, representing alternating bands of fossil deposition and flooding activity, sometimes are extremely wavy, because of earthquake-caused shifting and shaking.

I spent a long time studying these cracks and wavy lines, and wondered if any of these particular earthquakes had been the one that caused Herod’s port to sink beneath the Mediterranean.

Toward the end of my jeep tour, Allen asked me if today’s dive had been my best dive of the week. I glanced at the bone-dry desert around me and looked at him quizzically, wondering if he was suffering from heat stroke.

He wasn't. He showed me fossilized fish heads in the sand, and reminded me that we had been traveling along an ancient sea bed, that had once been covered by 1300 feet of water.

I had to admit that this had been one of the most educational "dives" I had ever been on. At 1300 feet below sea level, it was certainly the deepest dive I've ever experienced.