

TRAVEL: EXPLORE

There's much more to Barbados than sun, sea and sand discovers **Deborah Cicurel**, including the oldest synagogue in the Americas and its historic mikveh

# The Jews of the Caribbean

I'm sitting on the edge of a fishing boat, dangling a rod in the sea for the first time in my life, when my line suddenly pulls tight. To my surprise—and slight horror—an eel thrashes in the air. I throw it back, lean in the sun to relax and pray I don't catch anything else.

This is Barbados, and it's just like the brochures promised. It's almost too picturesque to be believed with soft, golden sands, dreamily balmy weather and deep, clear waters perfect for pepping up my Instagram account.

As we fish, turtles swim casually past, oblivious to our gawping; later, at our hotel, The House by Elegant Hotels—an upmarket adult-only property right on the beach—brightly-coloured crabs scuttle past our feet as we enjoy a beachside dinner of fresh fish and traditional rum punch.

But away from the gentle laps of the ocean, the laughter of tourists on the

beach and occasional roar of jetskis, sits one of the oldest synagogues in the Western Hemisphere, the Nidhe Israel synagogue, built in 1654 and still standing tall and majestic.

As beautiful as it is unexpected, the coral-coloured stone shul, nestled on the aptly-titled Synagogue Lane in Bridgetown, is awe-inspiring, a Caribbean treasure that has survived everything against the odds, from a hurricane in 1831 to a planned demolition by the Barbados Government.

It is a testament to the strength of the island's tiny Jewish community—including influential businessman Sir Paul Altman—that the synagogue is still going strong.

Though services do not run throughout the year, and mainly take place during busy tourist seasons, there is, perhaps unbelievably, another synagogue too, Shaare Tzedek. Two Jews, three synagogues, as the old joke goes.



Beyond the Caribbean Sea lies one of Barbados's less-known attractions—an historic synagogue (right)

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EDITED BY  
CATHY WINSTON  
cwinston@thejc.com



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PHOTO: DANIEL BEREK/FLICKR



I am shown around by a charming Bajan gentleman, Celso Brewster. Manager of the synagogue, he has worked with the Jewish community for a number of years, and as we walk around examining everything from the bimah to the plaques on the wall, regales me

with stories of the variety of tourists who come to see the shul, each with their own fascinating tales.

Brewster tells me of long-lost cousins from opposite ends of the earth, who have met for the first time during brief day stops on cruise ships and

even briefer tours of the synagogue; he tells me of centenarians who have made the trip to Barbados alone to see the shul for themselves in one last long-haul journey; he tells me of fami-

▶ CONTINUED ON P54

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## TRAVEL: EXPLORE

◀ CONTINUED FROM P53

lies who have wept in the graveyard together for old ancestors, staying for hours and holding each other.

The synagogue is not alone: it sits alongside a mikveh, a museum – the Nidhe Israel Museum – and a cemetery. There are even plans to open a Jewish community centre and kosher cafe next door, though when this will be a reality is yet to be seen.

It is seeing the mikveh that is perhaps the most fascinating element of my trip, because less than 10 years ago, it was buried and unknown under a car park. In 2008, students from the University of the West Indies began removing the tarmac and excavating what was thought to be the foundations of the rabbi's house. They found artefacts, ceramic shards, and eventually, a step.

## GETTING THERE

▶ **BRITISH Airways Holidays** has seven nights at **The House** by **Elegant Hotels** from **£1,989** per person **B&B** based on two adults sharing, including return flights from **London Gatwick**. Book by **December 1**. [www.ba.com/elegant-hotels](http://www.ba.com/elegant-hotels)

A similar stay at the **Colony Club** by **Elegant Hotels** costs from **£1,059** per person based on two adults and two children under 12 for departures in **June 2017**. Book by **September 30**. To contact **Celso Brewster**, email [nidhe@caribsurf.com](mailto:nidhe@caribsurf.com)

The excavators originally thought this step would lead to a cellar, but that theory was soon discarded. As excitement grew, the digging continued and more was discovered: the sandy soil beneath was water-logged.

As the last bits of debris were cleared, an unexpected discovery had been made that this was the original mikveh of the synagogue, with clear water from the long-concealed spring gushing in and astonishing the excavators, who had hardly expected to dig up this important piece of history.

Today, the mikveh is not in use but, as Brewster tells me, its healing powers are well known in Barbados, with a number of ill people asking him for bottles of the spring water, believing it to have curative powers. As far as the archaeological structure of the mikveh goes, it is the oldest mikveh in the Americas, according to Nidhe Israel, estimated to have been constructed between 1650 and 1654 by the Sephardim moving to Barbados from Recife, Brazil and Amsterdam.

It is quite amazing to be standing above such a recent discovery, the spring water as calm as if it had never been covered over, witnessing the enduring power of a mikveh dug up by unsuspecting students centuries after it was built.

There's just enough time for a quick walk around the museum too, which tells the story of how the Jews came to be in Barbados, fleeing to the Caribbean island in the 17th century from former Dutch Brazil after being driven



Barbados's capital Bridgetown with its pretty coloured buildings

away by the Portuguese Inquisition. With them they brought expertise not only in windmill technology, but in growing sugar cane.

The museum tells the story of the Jewish contribution to the history of Barbados, with artefacts on display including Torah scrolls and important archaeological pieces retrieved from the rabbi's house.

After my fascinating trip, I must say goodbye to Brewster, promising to return with all my family, who would no doubt be fascinated by the intriguing synagogue and its surroundings. I regretfully step into a taxi, pulling away from Synagogue Lane and Brewster's bewitching tales about the synagogue and its medley of visitors from around the world.

Fortunately, The House is just one of six luxury properties by **Elegant Hotels** on the island, along with the family-friendly **Colony Club**, where you could go with all your cousins, uncles, aunts and grandparents and still have space to escape with your thoughts when it all gets a bit much. Perks include thoughtful touches like sunscreen by the pool, free ice lollies and cold towels brought by staff, plus all-inclusive water sports.

So as my plane rises higher into the air, and the idyllic Bajan scene gets smaller beneath me, I'm already planning my next trip with my family in tow: not just to laze on a double sun lounger with a rum punch but to return once more to Nidhe Israel and listen to more of Brewster's captivating synagogue stories.

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## TRAVEL NEWS: AWAY



### HAVE AN ICE NIGHT

► THE chance to sleep in an ice hotel always meant heading to Lapland during the area's coldest, darkest months — until this year, at least.

For the first time there's a new ice experience opening in Jukkasjärvi called ICEHOTEL 365, due to open in mid-November and stay open throughout the year. The usual seasonal hotel opens in mid-December before its 700 million snowballs' worth of snow melts back into the Torne River in spring.

With 20 ice suites, nine with their own sauna and warm en-suite bathroom, plus a champagne bar and ice art gallery, the building uses solar panels warmed by the midnight sun to generate enough power to keep everything icy cold.

Fly direct to Kiruna in Swedish Lapland with Discover The World, celebrating 10 years of its "Iceflight". Three-night breaks start from £1,043. [www.discover-the-world.co.uk/icehotel](http://www.discover-the-world.co.uk/icehotel)

### CROATIA WITH KIDS

► GONE are the days when a pool was enough — the latest luxury family hotel to open in Croatia promises a mini adrenaline park, seven pools, a mini kids' gym, sports facilities and interactive walls in the rooms so children can customise their stay.

Hotel Amarin in Rovinj, Istria, on Croatia's northern Adriatic coast, opened in August. Guests staying before December 22 can receive 25 per cent off, with double rooms starting at €101 (£85) per night half-board. Book at [www.maistra.com](http://www.maistra.com).

Ryanair, EasyJet, Thomson Airways and Norwegian Air fly direct to Pula, half an hour from the hotel.



Hotel Amarin's interactive rooms

### VOYAGE TO WELLNESS

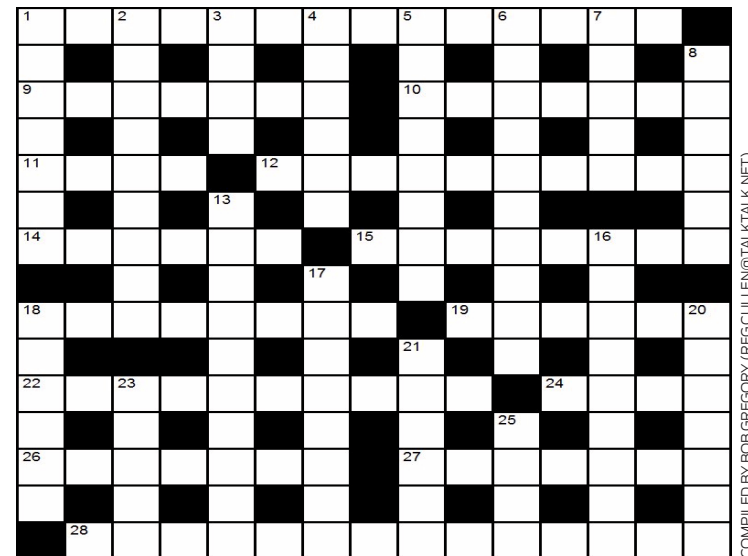
► SEABOURN is launching a new wellness and mindful living programme on board its cruises from January 2017. The Spa and Wellness

with Dr Andrew Weil programme will include daily meditation and yoga classes focusing on mind, body and spirit, as well as regular

seminars. Dr Weil will be on board Encore's inaugural cruise and will be on board a different ship every year. [www.seabourn.co.uk](http://www.seabourn.co.uk)

## GAMES

### CROSSWORD 733



COMPILED BY BOB GREGORY (RFGCULLEN@TALK.NE.T)

#### ACROSS

- 1 Ritual baskets of sweets, pastries etc — gifts given among friends at Purim (Hebrew) (9,5)
- 9 "Forwards, eastwards" (ex political party + H) (Hebrew) (7)
- 10 How Haman's father is described in Esther 3:1 (7)
- 11 He ate treif meat, Cockney-style, in the garden with Eve (4)
- 12 Israeli politician, Palmach commander, general in the IDF, leader of Ahdut Ha-avoda party and acting Prime Minister (1918-1980) (5,5)
- 14 Drink, appearing sober after knocking it back (6)
- 15 Jewish-American singer and vaudeville entertainer — *The Jazz Singer* 1927 with a black face (1886-1950) (2,6)
- 18 Low mountain between Israel's route 12 and the Egyptian border — also known as Mehoz Hadarom (3,5)
- 19 Roughly paint a well-worn surface (6)
- 22 Cunningly offer elite symbol of immortality (4,2,4)
- 24 Lechah \*\*\*\* — Hebrew liturgical song welcoming in Shabbat (4)
- 26 Ah, acute trouble in the wine house! (7)
- 27 German-Jewish pioneer in immunology who discovered Salvarsan, the first treatment for syphilis (7)
- 28 "Hang it, I want something-different," he might have said to his gardeners — having 20 bottles of wine! (14)

#### DOWN

- 1 Ritual baths (Hebrew) (7)
- 2 Jewish-American comic actor best known for the pioneering 1950s live television series *Your Show of Shows* (1922-2014) (3,6)
- 3 Fertiliser for this sour fruit tree? (4)
- 4 Ancient port south of Haifa which was a Crusaders' outpost (6)

- 5 He gets a torn label that isn't beyond repair, apparently (8)
- 6 "Everlasting Love" — the second prayer recited during Maariv (Hebrew) (6,4)
- 7 Oxford college exam — top grade not obtainable, that is admitted (5)
- 8 Write "No French" on this small flag (6)
- 13 "There is None Like Our God" — hymn sometimes chanted at the end of the morning service (Hebrew) (2,8)
- 16 Eastern European plum brandy often distributed at a Shabbat kiddush (9)
- 17 Leave coat beside Irish lake (8)
- 18 One of the chamberlains Ahasuerus appointed to wait upon Esther (Esth. 4:5 — variant spelling) (6)
- 20 One of the sons of Shammai (1 Chron. 2:28) (7)
- 21 Cause displeasure by a push from the spring-board? (6)
- 23 Rub out some howler as erroneous (5)
- 25 Absolutely faithful, and that's no lie! (4)

#### ANSWERS TO LAST WEEK'S CROSSWORD

A	P	P	L	E	S	S	E	T	T	I	N	G	S
S	A	S					S	R	U	I			
H	E	R	U	T	S	E	P	H	A	R	D	I	M
P	A	O					I	D	N	C			
E	S	S	E	N	E	H	E	Z	E	K	I	A	H
N	H	I	Y	A	D	R	K	A					
A	R	A	R	A	T	G	R						
Z	H		A	R	A	V	A	H	G				
			V	F	P	A	L	A	C	E			
C	B	P	M	E	M	B	R	H					
A	F	I	K	O	M	A	N	V	A	S	H	T	I
N	L	G	S			G	E	N					
A	L	G	E	R	I	A	N	S	T	I	R	A	N
A	A	O	D			H	Z	O					
N	E	H	E	M	I	A	H	B	A	A	L	A	M

### SHABBAT SCRABBLE 674

#### SOLVE OUR Shabbat-friendly crossword.

Writing is not required — just use your Scrabble board and tiles to spell out the answers to the cryptic clues.

**HOW TO PLAY:** Use the letter tiles from the game of Scrabble to spell out the answers to the clues below. Do not use the two blank tiles. Place the tiles on the Scrabble board according to the grid references given with the clues. If you successfully complete the puzzle, you will have used all 98 tiles.

#### ACROSS

- 1D In a frenzy sounds unreal. (4)
- 1I Father's attempt at baking. (6)
- 1K Kept for a ransom. (7)
- 1M Bing was the best. (7)
- 2G A pleasant walk through the rough. (7)
- 4B Would a fireman wear this? (6)
- 7J Here if looking for a cow. (6)
- 8F Charge against 49 in cycle race. (4)
- 10D A commercial stopper. (4)
- 10H A rather stilted horse. (6)
- 11L Inset on some cutlery. (5)

#### DOWN

- 1A Dad used an axe on the antelope. (5)
- 2G Vantage with 50 for seasoning. (7)
- 4B Pay a toll if wears this swimsuit. (6)
- 5K The queen of furniture. (4)
- 6B Stratagem without treats is a regular gathering. (3)
- 7J Next in line apparently. (4)
- 8B Union of stars. (6)
- 10H Farmer's desire. (4)
- 11A Two biblical men make an inferior set. (3-3)
- 12J Why the cricket match was stopped. (6)
- 13B Don't be like Haig. (5)
- 15E Smell the perfume. (5)

#### ANSWERS TO SCRABBLE CROSSWORD 673

**ACROSS** Trainedm Fez, Boxer, Ka, Set, Marjoram, Ewer, Dulcet, Loud, Verso, Gait, Gain, Yips, Gift  
**DOWN** Finer, Block, Amaze, Net, Enquiry, Road, School, Oblong, Event, Midge, Pushy, Gut, Twin, Fad

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