

# The Jewish Travler THE SYNAGOGUE ON THE NEVIS

By Erica Meyer Rauzin

The oldest synagogue in the Caribbean is now a square of gray stone ruins across from the old Jewish cemetery in Charlestown, capital of the West Indies island of Nevis, one of the British (though now independent) Virgin Islands.

Arriving there as a cruise ship passenger, I ran a few land-based errands. Then I went in search of the synagogue site, although the ship's information sheet warned, "Thought to date from the mid-17th century, the synagogue structure suffered the fate of many Nevis buildings in an earthquake. It is not even certain that the ruined structure, still an active archaeological site, is the temple. It is only known that there was a synagogue somewhere on the island from European records of the period."

Charlestown is surrounded by beauty - sage green hills, aqua ocean, white beaches - but the downtown is down at heels during this unusual tourist-deprived season. Only the hotel areas along the beaches are pristine and fancy. The infrastructure clearly needs a cash boost, but the level of civility, pleasantness and helpfulness seems to be fine shape despite the slow tourist season.

I shopped a bit and then looked for a cab to take me to the cemetery and synagogue site. I asked a woman cab driver what it would cost. "You don't need a cab for

that," she explained, to my surprise. "Just go up that alleyway and when you get to the top, turn right. It's there."

Thanking her, I walked up the alley, passing flocks of young girls in plaid uniforms and starched white shirts coming down from their school. At the top of the hill, past a few small, dilapidated concrete-block houses, was a grassy plot of land, about two-thirds the size of a football field, fenced in with chain link. A few power poles stood just inside, along the fence, but it was otherwise pristine, with about a dozen gray stone catafalques in spread out clusters on the lush, trimmed grass. I was afraid at first that the cemetery was locked, but when I reached the leaf-green wrought iron gate, it opened easily.

The graves dated to the sixteen and seventeen hundreds; the people were Sephardic Jews who migrated north from Brazil to escape the Inquisition. At the time, "one-quarter of the Nevis population was Jewish," says our information sheet, "and it is widely believed that the immigrants introduced modern techniques for cultivating and crystallizing refined sugar that made production viable on Nevis and St. Kitts," the sister island.

The stones on the time-ravaged tops of the crypts were hard to make out, although I could detect

the occasional name and inscription in English, Hebrew and Portuguese. Two hand prints, palms spread like a father placing

against the back fence that separates the cemetery from an apartment building, and sat there for a while, absorbing the quiet, think-



A view of the Jewish cemetery, Charlestown, Nevis.

his hands to bless a child, were engraved on one stone. With a prayer, I put a rock on the grave of a woman named Sarah, thinking how strange it must seem to the people who live adjacent to the cemetery that folks like me wander up the hill, put pebbles on the tombs - for there were many - and leave. I saw a small bench under a shady mimosa tree, standing

against these Jews 300 years ago.

The broken walls of the synagogue ruins, across the street kitty-cornered from the cemetery gate, form a square the size of a one-room cottage and about three feet high. The ruins show the evidence of some repairs over time, in the form of concrete patches amid the old, gray stones. Two

short pillars in the front of the room may once have been the bima. Here again, the grass is carefully trimmed and the site is immaculately clean.

Today, Nevis is an entirely Christian country. The independent Nevisians, from the helpful salesladies to the cab drivers, cops and schoolgirls in blue plaid jumpers are black African-Caribbeans - primarily the descendants of West African slaves. And, though this is their country and they are of a different race and a different religion and live in a tropical culture that is very different from ours, they treat our remnant of a cemetery and our shadow of a synagogue with care and respect. I thought you'd like to know. ☆

For more information, visit the website of the Jewish Community of Nevis Archaeological Project, [www.tc.unn.edu/~terre011/Nevis.html](http://www.tc.unn.edu/~terre011/Nevis.html).

## The Cohenheads Dance the Hora?

It Must be Freewheeling New Orleans

By Tom Tugend

Los Angeles (JTA) — The theme of last year's Mardi Gras parade in New Orleans was "2001: A Space Fallacy" — and the Jewish contingent, masked as the Cohenheads, danced the hora through the French Quarter behind the Mothership Yentaprise, tossing out a thousand Star of David-embazoned bagels to the hungry masses.

Led by King David and Jewish American Princess Adama, attended by droid 3CPAs and a klezmer band, the "Krewe du Jieux" flaunted its mission statement:

"To kibbitz on strange new worlds; to seek out new life forms and sell to them retail; to boldly schlep where no one has shlepped before."

New Orleans is one of the few cities in America where Jews feel secure enough to play off their stereotypes at the largest public event of the year.

Catherine Kahn, president of the Southern Jewish Historical Society and a fifth-generation resident of New Orleans, confirms the local Jews' sense of comfort.

One of the many pleasant aspects of Jewish life here is "a sense of belonging," she says.

"Historically, this is a city with a great sense of tolerance, the flip side being that we tolerate a lot of crookedness in our public officials," adds Kahn.

The tone was set when the first wave of young Jewish men migrated from Alsace-Lorraine — then a disputed area on the French-German border - in the late 18th and early 19th centuries

attitude comes through in an oft-repeated local gag.

"When do New Orleans Jews keep kosher?"

"When they eat raw oysters only in months with an 'r' in their names."

Which means, in practice, that they abstain only in May, June, July and August — when the oysters are out of season anyhow.

The dictum does not apply, of course, to the Chabad movement, which has established a presence on the Tulane University campus.

Tulane, a private university, has a student body that is more than one-fourth Jewish, remarkable in a state where Jews make up less than half a percent of the total population.

One reason is that Tulane, in its entire history, has never had a restrictive Jewish quota, so in the early and middle decades of the past century, "a lot of smart Jewish kids who couldn't get into northern universities came to Tulane," says Kahn.

In return, Jewish philanthropists have endowed many of Tulane's buildings, academic chairs and a Jewish studies program.

The uptown Jewish Community Center, following a \$4 million renovation, is one of the handsomest in the country. The Jewish Federation has created an innovative program, under which any Jewish child can receive a \$1,000 grant to attend the summer camp of his or her choice.

The new focal point for Jewish building and programs is the upscale suburb of Metairie, a favorite of young Jewish couples with children. In the works there is a Jewish "campus" with a new community center and a day school going up to the eighth grade.

Well worth a visit is the Dispersed of Judah Cemetery, which displays some of the most elaborate tombstone sculpture of any Jewish burial ground.

Politically, New Orleans is largely run by African-American politicians — the population is 60 percent black — though one of the two white incumbents on the

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