

Polishing a Lost Gem to Dazzle Tourists



Officials in Lod, Israel, hope a Roman-era mosaic floor will help restore the city's past glory.

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LOD, [Israel](#) — The beauty of the exquisitely preserved ancient mosaic only seemed to underline the incongruity of its surroundings. The late-Roman-era mosaic floor, one of the largest and finest in Israel, was unveiled by the authorities last week for just the second time since it was discovered 13 years ago in the dilapidated eastern section of this poor town near the international airport, south of Tel Aviv. Some 1,700 years old, the magnificent tiled floor spreads over almost 2,000 square feet, shaded from the harsh summer sun by a thin awning and surrounded by a canvas fence. A panoply of colorful depictions of birds, fish, exotic animals and merchant ships, the mosaic conjures up an intriguing reminder of Lod's more glorious past.

The archaeologists of the Israel Antiquities Authority believe the mosaic, which lacks any inscriptions, was commissioned by a wealthy individual who owned a grand villa here. Lod, which is mentioned in the Bible, was an important center in ancient times, and this part of it is known to have been a neighborhood of the rich. Today, the site is overlooked by drab apartment blocks with laundry hanging on lines out of windows, surrounded by garbage-strewn yards. A mixed city of Jewish immigrants and Muslim and Christian Arabs, modern Lod is usually

associated with hardship, its diverse population largely of low socioeconomic standing and often described by local officials as a challenge.

Now, though, the authorities here hope to revitalize Lod and turn it, of all things, into a major tourist destination thanks to the treasures lurking under the city's more modern layers of earth. "This is not the strongest city in Israel," acknowledged Ilan Harari, the mayor of the city, who attended the rare opening of the mosaic site. But in the future, he said, it will be an "amazing tourist center. We believe thousands will come."

The Lod mosaic was discovered in 1996, when Miriam Avissar, an archaeologist for the [Israel Antiquities Authority](#), was sent to carry out a routine salvage excavation because the local council wanted to widen a road. This area of old Lod was already known to be rich in mosaics, but most were badly damaged or under buildings. "I saw a white frame, then a tiger," said Ms. Avissar, who has recently retired, recalling her first glimpses of the mosaic. "It was completely flat and in marvelous condition." Once exposed, the mosaic was put on public display for a single weekend, during which some 30,000 Israelis flocked to see it. It was then covered up again while the antiquities authority sought financing to carry out the necessary conservation work and to build appropriate facilities at the site.

Donations have now been found and the project is being revived. The mosaic was briefly revealed last Wednesday to news organizations, and is to open to the public for three days, starting Thursday. It will then be removed to a laboratory in Jerusalem for painstaking conservation. In 2010, a section will be sent to the United States for exhibit at the [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#) in New York. Two years from now, the entire mosaic is supposed to be returned to this patch of ground in eastern Lod and put on permanent display in a protected environment. For the residents who live around the site, the mosaic is a rare gem in an otherwise squalid landscape. "It is beautiful," said Amal Amin, 40, who was born in an Arab-style stone house adjacent to the site. "They say there is another mosaic under my parents' home."

Tatiana Zeitsef, a Jewish immigrant from Tashkent, Uzbekistan, living in a low-income apartment block across the street, said she had heard about the mosaic but had never seen it. Instead, like many in this run-down old section of the city, she complained about the garbage, saying "nothing ever gets done."

In recent decades, life here has been mostly peaceful, though residents point to underlying tensions. Some Jewish residents say the younger Arab generation is angry and increasingly hostile, while Sheikh Adel, the muezzin of a downtown mosque, pointed to a recent influx of religious Jewish nationalists who he said had come to the city “to incite.”

In a pamphlet distributed by city hall, the city council says it sees the mosaic and the potential for tourism as a lever to a striking change in the image of Lod not just in the eyes of other Israelis and the tourists landing at the airport, but primarily in the minds of the local residents themselves.