

**Israel: Birding in the Holy Land**  
*November 2–13, 2019*  
**with Mass Audubon's Elissa Landre**



*Cranes at dawn, by Jonathan Meyrav*

## About This Tour

**PACE:** This trip was designed to be a blend of serious birding with a few visits to historical and cultural sites.

**PHYSICAL DIFFICULTY:** Easy to moderate. City tours will involve a lot of walking and standing, but all will be done at a slow pace. One of the hotels has 4 floors (and no elevator).

**CLIMATE:** November usually has mild days and cool evenings. Temps could rise to 70 degrees F in the day and drop to 60s at night. In the Negev Desert, temps will be somewhat higher and could get into the 80s. Overall, Israel has a mostly Mediterranean climate.

**ACCOMMODATIONS AND TRANSPORTATION.** Hotels are very good with wifi, fine dining, and laundry services. A 20-seat minibus with driver will be our transportation throughout the tour.

## Tour Overview

Located at the interface of three continents—Europe, Asia, and Africa—Israel is at a geographic and cultural crossroads. This very special trip, organized by the Israel Ornithological Center, will be rich with birds as well as history. Although enclosed by deserts, Israel is home to Mount Hermon, the headwaters of the Jordan River, which runs along the country’s eastern border and flows into lush valleys to the west. The course of the Jordan and the availability of its waters has played a role in the complex political landscape of the region. Much of the river borders areas that have been transformed into agricultural lands of wheat, corn, peanuts, and other crops. These agricultural fields are full of birds!

The trip is timed for the end of fall migration. We will see resident birds, but also the passage of migrants and a mix of African, Asian, and Mediterranean species at the edge of their range, including: thousands of Common Cranes, eagles, buzzards, harriers, falcons, and kites.

We will begin and end in the city of Tel Aviv. Over the 12 days, we will explore the Hula Valley, the Golan Heights (Eurasian Griffon, Bonelli’s Eagle, Blue Rock-thrush), the Sea of Galilee (Pygmy Cormorant, White and Black stork), the Dead Sea (Sand Partridge, Brown-necked Raven, Tristram’s Starling), the Negev Desert (Macqueen’s Bustard, Barbary Falcon (a race of Peregrine Falcon), Arabian Babbler, Syrian Serin, Eurasian Skylark), and, of course, the historic city of Jerusalem—where we will visit the Jerusalem Bird Observatory as well as a tour of the old city. (*Black Stork*, by Jonathan Meyrav)



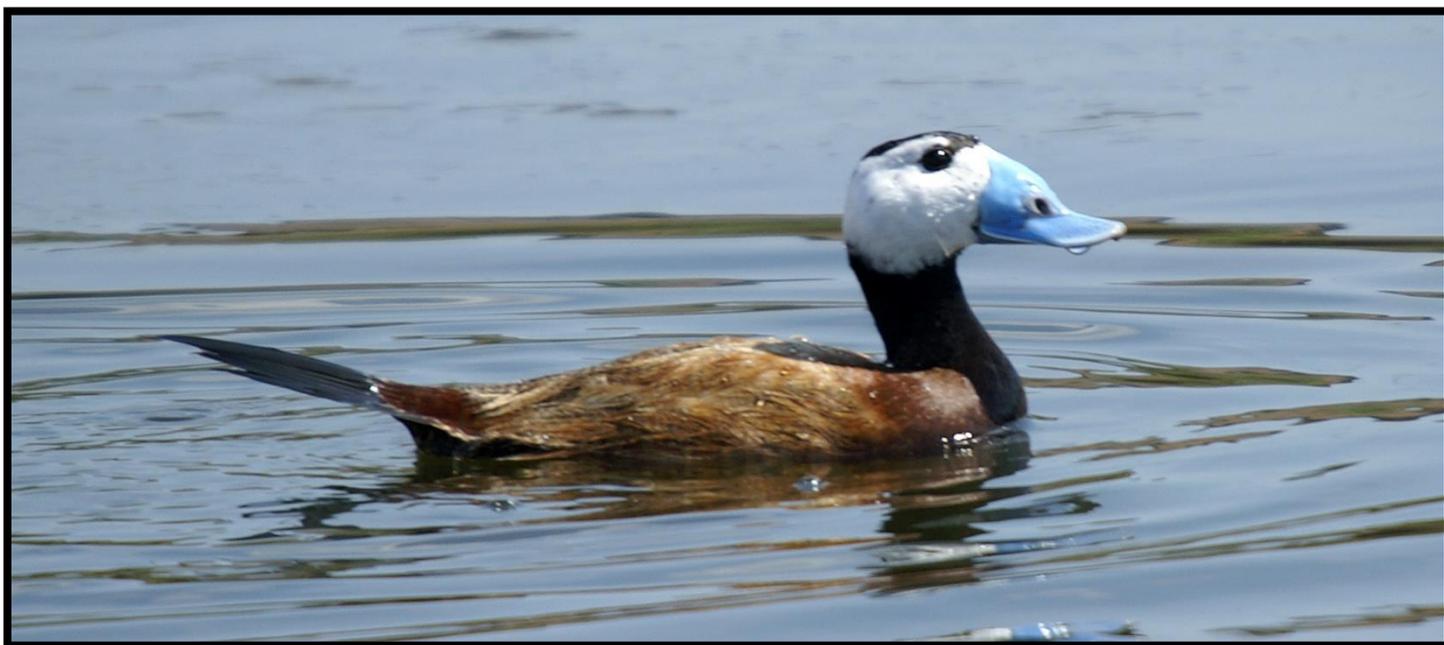
## Day-to-Day Itinerary

### Day 1, November 2: Arrival in Tel Aviv

Plan to arrive before 4:00 pm, if possible. A group transfer will be arranged. Our hotel is right on the beach, where birds such as Great Cormorant, Little Egret, Armenian Gull, Sandwich Tern, and Pied Kingfisher might be seen. Visitors to the hotel gardens include a regional endemic, White-spectacled Bulbul, plus Laughing Dove, Hooded Crow, White Wagtail, and Common Myna. We'll meet our local leader at 6:00 pm in the hotel lobby for a briefing followed by our welcome dinner.

**Overnight:** Isrotel Royal Beach Hotel | <https://www.isrotel.com/isrotel-hotels/tel-aviv-herzliya/royal-beach-tel-aviv/> | D

### Day 2, November 3: Negev Desert



*White-headed Duck, by Ferran Pestaña, via Flickr (CC BY-SA 2.0)*

After breakfast, we'll head to the semiarid Judean Plain where we will bird the reservoirs and agricultural areas for their large numbers of wintering ducks and birds of prey. Even traveling through the Negev Desert, we will find lush stretches of celery fields and other crops over which countless raptors can be seen: Greater Spotted and Imperial eagle, Peregrine Falcon, Common Buzzard, Eurasian Marsh-Harrier, and Hen and Pallid harrier.

The rare White-headed Duck winters here in good numbers. As we search for this beautiful bird, we'll enjoy the diversity of other waterfowl, which will likely include Northern Shoveler, Green-winged Teal, Common Pochard, Tufted and Ferruginous duck, and Little and Eared grebe.

After lunch, we will continue south to the Negev Desert to visit a landfill that hosts many thousands of Black Kites—an amazing spectacle! We will arrive at our hotel around 6:00 pm, our base for the next three nights.

**Overnight:** Isrotel Ramon Inn | <https://www.isrotel.com/isrotel-hotels/negev-desert/isrotel-ramon-inn/> | BLD

### **Day 3, November 4: Western Negev**

The Negev Desert occupies the southern half of the country. The landscape is varied with sandy dunes, rocky plateaus, dry river valleys (wadis), and deep craters.

Following breakfast, we will head to the Western Negev region for the day. This area combines vast agricultural fields and semidesert native habitats and is very important for wintering species. We will get our first taste of desert birds and search for several rare birds that winter here such as Imperial Eagle, Saker Falcon, and the endangered Sociable Lapwing. Besides these rarities, Western Negev is renowned for birds of prey. We should rack up quite the list today.

We will have lunch at the beautiful kibbutz community of Gevulot and continue exploring the area for most of the day.

**Overnight:** Isrotel Ramon Inn | BLD

### **Day 4, November 5: Negev Desert, Mitzana, and Mitzpe Ramon**



*Little Owl, by Jonathan Meyrav*

Today, we'll pack our breakfasts to get an early start on birding the desert area close to the Egyptian border. The desert around the town of Nitzana is a remote wilderness area and the last refuge for the endangered Macqueen's Bustard. They are not always easy to find in winter, but well worth the time to look. The area is home to a host of other species such as Crowned and Spotted sandgrouse, Cream-colored Courser, Arabian Babbler, Great Gray Shrike, and the desert race of Little Owl.

This wild area is also home to a wide variety of mammals such as Dorcas Gazelle, Golden Jackal, and even Arabian Wolf. Following lunch, we will work our way back to the town of Mizpe Ramon for birding and sightseeing at the sizable erosion cirque known as the Ramon Crater. This spectacular geological feature was formed not by meteor or volcano, but by intense riverine erosion over eons. This type of geologic formation is unique to the Negev Desert. For those who wish, we will enjoy the sunset along the crater.

**Overnight:** Isrotel Ramon Inn | BLD

## Day 5, November 6: High Negev and Zin Valley



*White-crowned Wheatear, by Jonathan Meyrav*

Following breakfast, we'll check out and head north to the High Negev. We will visit Sde Boker and the adjacent Zin Valley, one of the most scenic lookouts in the country. The nearby canyon holds good numbers of Eurasian Griffons, but we'll also hope to be lucky enough to sight the rare Lanner and Barbary falcon. Our target birds will include Near-East specialties like Sand Partridge, Mourning and White-crowned wheatear, Scrub Warbler, Blackstart, Black Redstart, Arabian Babbler, Desert Lark, and Syrian Serin.

From here we will head north to Yeruhan Lake, south of the city of Dimona, located in the southern end of the Israeli coastal plain. We'll check various bodies of water for the rare White-headed Duck. This rare and beautiful waterfowl breeds farther north, in Turkey and the Caucasus, and winters in Israel in significant numbers, although it can often be challenging to find. However, there is a nice variety of other waterfowl species, such as Common Shelduck, Northern Shoveler, Green-winged Teal, Northern Pintail, and Ferruginous Duck. For added measure, sightings of Little and Eared grebe are probable today as well.

After a full day, we will head to Jerusalem for the night.

**Overnight:** Mount Zion Hotel | <https://www.hotels-of-israel.com/zion/index.html> | BLD

### **Day 6, November 7: Jerusalem**

Following an early breakfast, we will head to the Jerusalem Bird Observatory for a banding session and some up-close-and-personal interactions with some wintering species. Operated by the Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel (SPNI), the Jerusalem Bird Observatory (JBO) is one of Israel's most important birding centers and nature preserves. Located between the Knesset (Israeli Parliament) and the Supreme Court in central Jerusalem, JBO is home to a 1-acre tract of native vegetation that attracts thousands of migrating birds each year in the spring and fall, including: Syrian Woodpecker, Palestine Sunbird, Great Tit, Sardinian Warbler, Eurasian Blackbird, and Common Chiffchaff.

After our visit, we will meet with a tour guide specializing in Jerusalem for tour of many of the Old City's most important historical sites. Among the likely places we'll see are the Temple Mount (Al-Aqsa Mosque, Dome of the Rock, and Dome of the Chain), Church of the Holy Sepulcher, Western Wall (Wailing Wall), David's Tomb, Via Dolorosa, Cardo, and Jaffa Gate. There will be some free time in the afternoon for you to explore.

**Overnight:** Mount Zion Hotel | BLD

### **Day 7, November 8: Dead Sea Area**

The Dead Sea is a large salt lake in the Jordan Rift Valley that straddles the border of the Kingdom of Jordan, the West Bank, and Israel proper. The Dead Sea is remarkable for a number of reasons, including: at 1,407 feet below sea level, it is the planet's lowest elevation on land; at 34 percent salinity, it is 9.6 times as salty as the ocean; and with nearly 1,000 feet of water is the deepest hypersaline lake in the world.

This morning, we will head down to the Dead Sea area and visit some beautiful sites in the Judean Desert. As with most locations in Israel, the region around the Dead Sea has been inhabited for thousands of years. In the mid-20th century, hundreds of religious documents dating from the 1st century B.C.E. and 1st century C.E. were found not far from the sea's northwestern shore. These documents became known as the "Dead Sea Scrolls." We will have a short stop and a quick look at the caves (at the Qumran Park parking area) where the scrolls were found.

Later, we will explore the famous En-Gedi Nature Reserve, a unique natural area home to desert-specialty birds, mammals, and complex topography. Situated along the Dead Sea's western shore, En-Gedi is Israel's largest oasis, containing two year-round streams, waterfalls, springs, and relatively lush vegetation. The landscape here is wonderfully varied. We will spend time birding and walking here. There are two mammals of special interest: Nubian Ibex and Rock Hyrax. Both of these arid-country species occur only locally in Israel. An exciting list of bird possibilities includes: Fan-tailed and Brown-necked raven, Rock Martin, Green Bee-eater, Blackstart, Palestine Sunbird, White-crowned Wheatear, Arabian Babbler, Tristram's Starling, and more.

Those interested will have an opportunity to dip their toes in the famous waters of the Dead Sea. If the weather is warm, those who wish are welcome to take a dip in the sea—an easy process as the beach includes facilities for changing clothes.

**Overnight:** Mount Zion Hotel | BLD

### **Day 8, November 9: Jordan Valley and Bet Shean Valley**

Following breakfast, we will leave Jerusalem and drive north through the Jordan Valley and bird the famous Bet Shean Valley, an extensive area of fields, fishponds, and varied habitats. The area will be packed with birds, but we will only have time to sample some key sites. In the afternoon, we will head to the Sea of Galilee for sunset.

**Overnight:** Pastoral Hotel | <https://www.pastoral-hotel.com/> | BLD

## Day 9, November 10: Northern Golan and Valley of Tears



*Nimrod Fortress, by Jonathan Meyrav*

We will start the day at the famous Nimrod fortress in the Northern Golan and head up to Mt. Hermon. Mt. Hermon is Israel's highest mountain and the only place with alpine habitat in the country. In the areas of dry scrub and rocky hillsides, we'll look for habitat-specific species such as Sombre Tit, Eastern Black Redstart, Western Rock Nuthatch, and Rock Bunting.

After the mountain, we will visit a Druze village for a traditional meal. These fascinating people have roots in western Asia. The Druze are an Arabic-speaking people, yet they are not Muslim. Dispersed across four countries of the Levant—Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and Israel—the Druze form a unique society whose religion is monotheistic and contains elements of many faiths. The Israeli-Druze live mainly in the north of the country and are recognized by the Israeli government as a distinct ethnic community.

In the afternoon, we will visit an area of the Golan known as the “Valley of Tears.” This is the site of the epic Valley of Tears battle that was fought between Israeli and Syrian forces, October 1973. In contrast to the violent legacy of the site, this can also be a good birding spot. The grasslands and open brush country around the site attract wandering groups of Corn Bunting, Eurasian Linnet, Eurasian Skylark, and Crested Lark. Remarkably, Mountain Gazelle, a range-restricted mammal, also occurs in the general area, and we will make an effort to see it.

**Overnight:** Pastoral Hotel | BLD

## Day 10, November 11: Hula Valley



*Bird viewing via mobile carrier: photo by max nathans, via Flickr, (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)*

We will make a very early departure for our sunrise date with tens of thousands of wintering Common Cranes in the Agamon Hula Park. We'll have a full day exploring the Hula Valley! The valley has been occupied by humans for more than 9,000 years, when Paleolithic hunters settled, attracted by good fishing opportunities in what was once a large, marsh-fringed lake, called Hula Lake. Drained during the settlement effort of the Israeli State, large areas of the valley have been reflooded and instituted as a wildlife sanctuary.

The marshes, lakes, and fields in this valley create critically important habitats for resident and migratory species and are essential stopover sites for a number of imperiled species. Many shorebirds stop to feed here, as well as wintering wading birds, kingfishers, cormorants, and large flocks of tremendous Great White Pelicans and elegant Black Storks.

The most famous visitors are the thousands of Common Cranes that winter in the Hula Valley. We will start our day very early to get to the blind in time to see the cranes first emerge from the mist in the morning sunrise. This day will be full of wonderful birding sights, including: Eurasian Spoonbill, Pied Avocet, and many species of shorebirds and songbirds! Bluethroat, Zitting Cisticola, Clamorous Reed Warbler, and Black-winged Pratincole have all been seen here.

**Overnight:** Pastoral Hotel | BLD

### **Day 11, November 12: Mediterranean Coast**

There will be an early morning birding session at a fishpond complex near Kfar Blum, then breakfast at the hotel and check out. We will work our way south and visit the area of Ma'agan Michael on the Mediterranean coast. Ma'agan Michael contains nearly 1.5 million square meters of open-air ponds where carp, mullet, bass, and many other fish are raised. As a result, thousands of birds gather here. The multitude of gulls can include: Black-headed, Armenian, Caspian, and Slender-billed gull. We will enjoy lunch in the Kibbutz and after more birding in the afternoon, we will head back to Tel Aviv and our Isrotel Royal on the beach, where we will have our farewell dinner. Overnight: Isrotel Royal Beach Hotel | BLD

### **Day 12, November 13: Depart for Flights Homeward**

After breakfast, there will be a group transfer to the Tel Aviv Airport.



*Graceful Prinia, by orientalizing, via Flickr, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0*

## About Your Mass Audubon Guide

Elissa Landre is Sanctuary Director of Mass Audubon's Broadmoor Wildlife Sanctuary. She has led tours in Belize, Hawaii, Trinidad, and Tobago, Costa Rica, Hawaii, Ecuador, and Mexico. She has consulted on interpretation, guide training, and marketing for ecotourism at national parks in Bolivia and Poland, holds a master's degree in biology, runs a bird-banding station at Broadmoor, and is a past president of the Association of Field Ornithologists. On tours, she likes to explore how protected conservation land is managed for birds and native plants.



## About Your Local Guide



Jonathan Meyrav's interest in birds began at the age of 10, and by age 12 he was the youngest member of a junior birders' club. At 14 Jonathan earned his banding license and began participating in elaborate monitoring projects in Israel. As an environmental studies student at Ben Gurion College, Jonathan fell in love with the desert and desert birding, and would spend entire days monitoring migrants and taking part in surveys and research programs. Jonathan has traveled the world extensively, from the African grasslands to the Amazon jungles and the frozen Canadian tundra. To date, he has seen more than 3,000 birds across 25 countries. He has intimate knowledge of southern Israel's birds, and his ability to lead tours in English, French, Spanish, or Hebrew is incomparable. Today, Jonathan is the most experienced birding tour leader in Israel, with sharp identification skills and a keen interest in desert birds, migration, and vagrancy patterns.

He spends the migration seasons where the birds do, in Eilat in the spring and Northern Israel in the fall and winter. Since 2010 Jonathan has served as the Tourism Director of the Israeli Ornithological Center (IOC). He spends around 70 days a year guiding foreign birdwatchers, donors, and birding tour groups. In recent years Jonathan and his team have developed several large scale international events: the Hula and Eilat Birding Festivals and several seminars around bird conservation. Jonathan is the coordinator of the new and exciting project "The Champions of the Flyway," an international bird-a-thon that raises funds and awareness against the illegal killing of birds along the flyways.

**Tour Price:** US \$5500 per person, double occupancy. Single supplement, US\$900. Minimum number of travelers for this pricing: 10 Maximum group size is 14. (*A small group surcharge may be added if the group size is below the minimum*)

**Price includes:**

- All meals and accommodations as indicated in the itinerary
- Services of Mass Audubon naturalist leader, Elissa Landre
- Services of local naturalist guides
- All excursions and entrance fees
- Extensive trip preparation notes and bird checklist
- Transportation within Israel
- All tips and gratuities (*with the minimum number signed on*)
- Medical evacuation insurance
- Carbon offset for all your international flights

**Price excludes:**

- International airfare home to Tel Aviv
- Porterage
- Passport and visa fees; travel insurance
- Airport taxes; excess baggage charges
- Items of a personal nature, including alcoholic beverages, snacks, laundry, and telephone calls; other items not specifically mentioned as included.

**HOW TO BOOK:** Email or call us at [travel@massaudubon.org](mailto:travel@massaudubon.org)/800.289.9504 to reserve your place.

**APPLICATIONS, RESERVATIONS, DEPOSITS:** Early applications are strongly encouraged. Trip rosters usually must be finalized 4 months before departure! **All applications must be accompanied by a completed reservation form and \$1000 deposit.** Deposits can be by check or credit card (Visa or MasterCard). We reserve the right to decline your application. In the case of questionable health, we reserve the right to require a physician’s certification to affirm you are capable of the activities. Final payment is due 90 days before the departure date. **Final payment must be by check or money order.**

**RATES:** All tour prices are based on double occupancy. If you would like us to find you a roommate, we’ll do our best, but cannot guarantee a share. If we cannot find a share, you will need to pay the single supplement. All forms and fares are accurate at the time of publication (Jan 2019) but are subject to change at any time prior to departure. It is our policy to only pass on the actual amount of any increases in airfares or land costs such as those increases due to the devaluation of the dollar. Rarely, a price increase may be called for if the group falls below the minimum, as listed in the itinerary.

**TRAVEL DOCUMENTS:** A U.S. passport valid for at least six months beyond the trip’s departure date is recommended. We also recommend you read the US State department page on Israel, as it notes: *“All persons seeking to enter or depart Israel, the West Bank, or Gaza are subject to immigration and security screening, possibly including prolonged questioning and physical searches, and may be denied entry or exit....”*

**FLIGHTS:** You, the traveler, are responsible for booking and paying for your own international flights. Once we have the minimum group size, we will give you the recommended flight schedule. You may book flights directly with the airline, online, or with a travel agent. Please be aware that most tickets are non-refundable, therefore you should not

book your flight arrangements until you have checked with us to be sure the tour has the minimum number of participants for the trip to go.

**NOTE: Any pre or post trip excursions will need to be done on your own. As this is a new trip for us, we do not have the capabilities to make individual travel or touring arrangements.**

**TRIP INSURANCE:** A brochure and application for optional trip cancellation, illness and baggage insurance will be sent to you upon registration. We do purchase medical evacuation insurance to cover you while on the tour. We strongly recommend that you research and purchase trip cancellation insurance to protect yourself. See [www.insuremytrip.com](http://www.insuremytrip.com)

**PHOTOS:** Mass Audubon reserves the right to make use of any photographs taken by our guides on the tour. We guarantee that no photos of a compromising nature will be used. If you have questions or concerns, please contact us.

**CANCELLATION POLICY: If you need to change your booking, you must inform us immediately in writing.** All cancellations must be done in writing and are effective upon receipt in the Massachusetts Audubon Travel Office. Cancellations received up to 121 days prior to departure will be refunded deposits less a \$300 per person fee. For cancellations between 120 and 90 days prior to departure, all deposits are forfeit, but any balance paid beyond that is refundable. There are no refunds of any kind for cancellations 90 days or less from departure. **We strongly urge all travelers to purchase trip cancellation insurance.** You will be sent information from the Massachusetts Audubon Society upon receipt of your deposit.

**YOUR RESPONSIBILITY:** Although every precaution is taken to safeguard you and your belongings, group travel trips by their nature involve a certain amount of risk. Trip participants should understand that the domestic and international trips sponsored/operated by Massachusetts Audubon Society (Mass Audubon Tours)—hereafter collectively “M.A.S.”—involve known and unknown risks. M.A.S. assumes no responsibility for injuries, death, financial losses or damage to clients’ property caused by or occurring during participation in any of the travel trips sponsored/operated by M.A.S. Trip participants must assume responsibility for having sufficient skill and fitness to participate in the trips and activities offered or sponsored by M.A.S. Trip participants must also certify that they have no medical, mental or physical conditions which could interfere with their abilities to participate in the activities and/or trips they are participating in and they must assume and bear the cost of all risks that may be created, directly or indirectly, by any such condition. It is the responsibility of trip participants to have in place adequate insurance to cover any injury, damage or emergency transportation costs related to their travel and/or participation in trip activities and/or to bear the costs of such injury, damage or emergency transportation costs. Because of the risks associated with the travel trips sponsored by M.A.S. we urge all trip participants to supplement their own insurance with travel or vacation or emergency response types of insurance. M.A.S. requires that all trip participants acknowledge and assume these risks by reading and signing an M.A.S. Release and Waiver and Assumption of Risk contract prior to departure.

**CONDITIONS OF TRAVEL:** Travelers will be provided with an itinerary and trip preparation information. It is expected that travelers will read this information prior to trip departure. Travelers will be responsible for completing an application reservation form, including the personal information and a release of liability (see attached). Travelers will be expected to abide by the terms set for in the invoice. During the tour, travelers are asked to respect and follow the directions of their guide and leader.