Tell es-Sultan (Ancient Jericho)

Tell es-Sultan (Ancient Jericho): The Oldest Fortified Town in the World

Tell es-Sultan, or **Ancient Jericho**, is an archaeological mound about 1.5 km north of modern **Jericho**, in the Jordan Valley some 250 metres below sea level, beside the spring of **Ain es-Sultan**. The tell holds remains going back to about 10,500 BC and is considered one of the oldest cities in the world and the oldest known fortified farming town: in the Neolithic period, more than 10,000 years ago, a permanent settlement with a wall, a ditch and a massive stone tower stood here. Excavations have revealed 29 phases of continuous occupation, up to a flourishing Canaanite city of the Bronze Age. On 17 September 2023 UNESCO inscribed it on

the World Heritage List as "Ancient Jericho / Tell es-Sultan", a site in the State of Palestine. This guide covers the tell's history, landmarks and significance.

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Quick facts

Tell es-Sultan at a glance

Arabic name	تل السلطان (أريحا القديمة)
Location	About 1.5 km north of Jericho, Jordan Valley
Elevation	About 250 metres below sea level
Earliest remains	About 10,500 BC
Occupation phases	29
Key features	Neolithic wall, ditch and stone tower
Water source	The perennial spring of Ain es-Sultan
Area	5.93 hectares, with a 22.53-hectare buffer zone
World Heritage	17 September 2023, 45th session of the World Heritage Committee, Riyadh

Management	Palestinian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, national archaeological park

The name

The site is known as **Tell es-Sultan** after the neighbouring spring of **Ain es-Sultan**, and as **Ancient Jericho** because it is the site of the first city before settlement moved to the location of modern Jericho. Researchers consider the name "Jericho" (Ariha) to be Canaanite in origin, linked to the moon or to the sweet scent of its orchards, and its people call it the "City of the Moon".

Location and Ain es-Sultan

The tell lies on the western side of the Jordan Valley, north of the Dead Sea, about a kilometre and a half north of the centre of Jericho, in the lowest inhabited place on earth. Beside it flows **Ain es-Sultan**, the perennial spring by which humans founded their first permanent settlements, and which, after rehabilitation, still waters Jericho and its orchards today. Nearby are the Monastery of the Temptation (Deir Quruntul), the Umayyad Hisham's Palace and the Ain es-Sultan refugee camp.

History: from the Natufians to the Canaanites

- **11th–10th millennium BC (Natufian period):** hunter-gatherers set up seasonal camps by Ain es-Sultan, and the earliest archaeological layers in the tell date to about 10,500 BC.
- **9th–8th millennium BC (Pre-Pottery Neolithic):** the site became a large permanent farming settlement, surrounded by a wall and ditch and with a massive stone tower, in one of humanity's first experiments in settled life and agriculture.
- **Early and Middle Bronze Age (3400–1550 BC):** a Canaanite city flourished on the tell, its remains revealing advanced urban planning; in

the Middle Bronze Age it became a large Canaanite city-state with innovative earthen rampart fortifications.
- **Later periods:** settlement gradually moved to the neighbouring plain, where Roman, Byzantine and then Islamic Jericho grew up; occupation layers in the area extend to the end of the Byzantine period in the 7th century CE.

The Tower of Jericho and the wall

The tell's most famous landmark is the **stone tower** from the Pre-Pottery Neolithic, some 10,000 years old, one of the oldest monumental structures built by humans. It is a round tower of undressed stone, about eight and a half metres high according to archaeological studies, with a stone staircase inside. The settlement was surrounded by a **stone wall and a rock-cut ditch**, which made Jericho the oldest known fortified town in the world. Scholars disagree on the tower's purpose, from defence and flood protection to a ritual or social role.

The plastered skulls

Human skulls coated in plaster were found in the tell, with facial features remodelled and shells set in place of the eyes, alongside Neolithic statues. These finds reveal an early development in religious beliefs and in rituals honouring the dead and the ancestors among Jericho's first inhabitants.

Excavations

The tell has been excavated for more than a century by successive foreign expeditions since the late 19th century, revealing 29 phases of occupation. Some early excavations destroyed parts of the structures, and many finds were taken out of Palestine. Since 1997 a joint Palestinian-Italian expedition of the Palestinian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities and Sapienza University of Rome has worked on the site, carrying out excavation, conservation and preparation of the site for

visitors.

World Heritage inscription

On **17 September 2023**, at the 45th session of the World Heritage Committee in Riyadh, UNESCO inscribed "Ancient Jericho / Tell es-Sultan" on the World Heritage List as a site in the State of Palestine, under criteria (iii) and (iv), recognising its role in the transition to settled farming life in the Fertile Crescent and in the emergence of urban culture in the Levant. It joined Palestine's other inscribed sites: the Church of the Nativity and the Pilgrimage Route in Bethlehem, Battir, and the old city of Hebron; the Monastery of St. Hilarion (Tell Umm Amer) in Gaza was later inscribed in 2024 during the genocidal war. The inscription angered the occupation authorities, while the Palestinian presidency and Ministry of Foreign Affairs welcomed it, the ministry calling for Palestinian sites to be protected from deliberate damage by the occupation.

The site today (2026)

The tell is managed as a national archaeological park under the Palestinian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, and visitors can see the tower, the wall and excavation trenches, and take the cable car from nearby up to the Monastery of the Temptation. The site needs protection and conservation work, especially the Bronze Age earthen fortifications. Tourism in Jericho has fallen sharply since the genocidal war on Gaza, because of the checkpoints and movement restrictions imposed by Israeli forces.

Frequently asked questions

Where is Tell es-Sultan?

About a kilometre and a half north of Jericho in the Jordan Valley, beside the spring of Ain es-Sultan.

Why is Jericho considered the oldest city in the world?

Because Tell es-Sultan holds remains going back to about 10,500 BC, and more than 10,000 years ago the oldest known fortified farming town stood here, with a wall, a ditch and a stone tower.

What is the Tower of Jericho?

A round Neolithic stone tower about 10,000 years old and about eight and a half metres high, one of the oldest monumental structures in history.

When was Tell es-Sultan inscribed on the World Heritage List?

On 17 September 2023, at the 45th session of the World Heritage Committee in Riyadh, as "Ancient Jericho / Tell es-Sultan".

How many occupation phases have excavations revealed?

29 phases, from the Neolithic through the Bronze Age and beyond.

Conclusion

By the spring of Ain es-Sultan, in the lowest place on earth, humans built the first fortified town 10,000 years ago and moved from wandering to farming and settled life. With its tower, its wall and its accumulated layers, Tell es-Sultan remains a witness that Palestine was one of the cradles of human civilisation, and to the roots of a people who still live in Jericho and guard its heritage.

Sources

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Last updated: October 19, 2026