

Stella Maris Monastery in Haifa



Stella Maris Monastery in Haifa: The Carmelite Monastery on Mount Carmel Overlooking the Sea

Stella Maris Monastery ("Star of the Sea") is a monastery and church of the **Discalced Carmelites** on the north-western tip of **Mount Carmel** in **Haifa**, overlooking the Mediterranean opposite the lighthouse of the same name. Beneath the church altar is a cave that Christians venerate as the cave of the **Prophet Elijah (Mar Elias)**, also revered by Muslims as al-Khidr. The Carmelites settled on

this rocky headland of Carmel in 1631; their monastery was demolished, and the present monastery and church were built in 1836, with Pope Gregory XVI granting the church the title of "minor basilica" three years later. This guide covers the monastery's history, architecture and significance.

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Quick facts

Stella Maris Monastery at a glance

Arabic name	دير ستیلا ماريس – حيفا
Meaning of the name	"Star of the Sea", a title of the Virgin Mary
Location	North-western tip of Mount Carmel, Haifa
Order	Discalced Carmelites (Latin Catholic)
Tradition	Cave of the Prophet Elijah (Mar Elias) beneath the altar
Carmelites settled	1631
Present monastery and church	1836; "minor basilica" title in 1839

Church	Painted dome, restored from 2022
Nearby	Stella Maris lighthouse, chapel of St. Simon Stock
Annual procession	Since 1914, from St. Joseph's Church to the monastery

The name

"**Stella Maris**" is Latin for "**Star of the Sea**", an ancient title of the Virgin Mary, patroness of sailors, fitting the monastery's position overlooking the sea and the lighthouse that guides ships. The Virgin is venerated here as "**Our Lady of Mount Carmel**", and a statue of her holding the child Jesus stands above the altar. The name "Stella Maris" has been attached to the church since it received the title of "minor basilica" in 1839.

Location

The monastery stands at the north-western tip of Mount Carmel, above the city of [Haifa](#), overlooking Haifa Bay and the Mediterranean, opposite the Stella Maris lighthouse. On the mountainside below lies the lower Cave of Elijah, sacred to Muslims and Christians, and some distance away lie Haifa's lower town and the Church of St. Joseph, linked to the monastery.

The Carmelites and Mount Carmel

The **Carmelite Order** arose on Mount Carmel in the late 12th and early 13th centuries, when hermits lived in the mountain's caves, especially in Wadi al-Siyyah about 4 km to the south, taking the Prophet Elijah as their model of contemplation and zeal. The Carmelites left the country in the late 13th century and returned in the Ottoman period, living between 1632 and 1762 in a monastery near the cave of Father Prosper on a spur of the mountain, before moving to the Stella Maris site.

History of the monastery

- **Late 12th century:** Carmelite hermits settled on the slopes of Carmel at the time of the Crusades, then left the country in the late 13th century.
- **1631:** a group of Carmelite monks settled on the rocky headland of Carmel overlooking the sea and founded their monastery, living between 1632 and 1762 near the cave of Father Prosper.
- **18th - early 19th century:** the monastery and a church built beside it were demolished.
- **1836:** the present monastery and church were built on the east side of the main road, opposite the lighthouse.
- **1839:** Pope Gregory XVI granted the church the title of "minor basilica", and it has been known as "Stella Maris" ever since.
- **November 1914:** during the First World War the Ottoman authorities ordered the monks to evacuate the monastery within three hours for army use; they moved their liturgical objects to safety, and Haifa's people turned to local notables to protect it.

Architecture and the church

The church contains a **cave** where the Prophet Elijah is said to have withdrawn in seclusion, venerated by Christians beneath the altar. Above the altar stands a statue of **Our Lady of Mount Carmel** holding the child Jesus. The church dome is decorated with interior paintings that needed restoration; work was planned for 2020 but delayed three years by the COVID-19 pandemic, until a restorer arrived from Rome on 4 October 2022 to begin. The monastery garden holds the Stations of the Cross and a small chapel of **St. Simon Stock**, one of the Carmelite saints.

The procession of Our Lady of Mount Carmel

Since 1914, during the First World War, Haifa's Christians have held an **annual procession** of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, carrying her statue from the Latin Church of St. Joseph in Haifa up to Stella Maris Monastery. The parish of St. Joseph, Stella Maris Monastery and the Monastery of Mar Elias at al-Muhraqa on Carmel are bound by a relationship the Carmelites describe as "one family".

Haifa and the Nakba

Haifa was an Arab city of Muslims and Christians, its churches and mosques spread across the slopes of Carmel and its lower town; in 1932 Arabs made up 73% of its population. In April 1948, as the British announced their withdrawal from the city, Zionist militias took control and some 95% of its Arab residents were expelled, and most of its old city was demolished. Stella Maris Monastery on the summit of Carmel survived, as did the Church of St. Joseph, both serving the Arab Christians who remained in Haifa.

The monastery today (2026)

Stella Maris Monastery remains the home of the Discalced Carmelites and a place of pilgrimage, where Haifa's Christians celebrate the feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel and its annual procession. From the summit of Carmel it overlooks an Arab city most of whose people were expelled in 1948, while the Palestinians who remained in Haifa continue to preserve their presence and their Christian and Muslim heritage there.

Frequently asked questions

Where is Stella Maris Monastery?

On the north-western tip of Mount Carmel in Haifa, overlooking the sea opposite

the Stella Maris lighthouse.

What does the name Stella Maris mean?

"Star of the Sea" in Latin, a title of the Virgin Mary, patroness of sailors.

When was Stella Maris Monastery built?

The Carmelites settled on the site in 1631, and after their monastery was demolished the present monastery and church were built in 1836.

What is the cave beneath the church?

A cave where the Prophet Elijah (Mar Elias) is said to have withdrawn in seclusion, venerated by Christians beneath the church altar.

Which order runs the monastery?

The Discalced Carmelites, a Latin Catholic order that arose on Mount Carmel.

Conclusion

On the summit of Carmel, where the first hermits lived in caves, Stella Maris Monastery has stood for nearly two centuries as a witness to Haifa and its history, from the Ottoman period to the Nakba. The "Star of the Sea" overlooking the city remains a symbol of an ancient Arab Christian presence in Haifa and part of the memory of a city whose expelled people still dream of returning.

Sources

- [Palestine 48 – Haifa](#)
- [Palestine 48 – Stella Maris Monastery](#)
- Carmelite Order in the Holy Land – Stella Maris Monastery
- Al Jazeera Encyclopedia – Haifa, city of mosques and churches (June 2024)

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