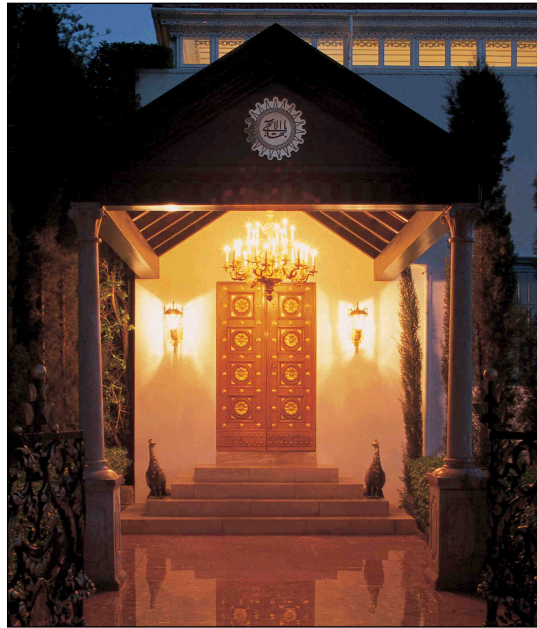


The Shrine of Baha'u'llah - Acre, Israel

Baha'u'llah spent the last twelve years of His life in dignity and relative comfort, living in a mansion at the site known as Bahji, north of Acre, where He subsequently passed away and was buried. About two years before He died, Baha'u'llah granted several interviews to Professor Edward Granville Browne, a noted British orientalist affiliated with Cambridge University, who visited the Holy Land in April 1890. Professor Brown's journal records a vivid account of his first encounter with Baha'u'llah in the latter's room in the mansion at Bahji:

My conductor paused for a moment while I removed my shoes. Then, with a quick movement of the hand, he withdrew, and, as I passed, replaced the curtain; and I found myself in a large apartment, along the upper end of which ran a low divan, while on the side opposite to the door were placed two or three chairs. Though I dimly suspected whither I was going and whom I was to behold (for no distinct intimation had been given to me), a second or two elapsed ere, with a throb of wonder and awe, I became definitely conscious that the room was not untenanted. In the corner where the divan met the wall sat a wondrous and venerable figure, crowned with a felt head-dress of the kind called *táj* by dervishes (but of unusual height and make), round the base of which was wound a small white turban. The face of him on whom I gazed I can never forget, though I cannot describe it. Those piercing eyes seemed to read one's very soul; power and authority sat on that ample brow; while the deep lines on the forehead and face implied an age which the jet-black hair and beard flowing down in indistinguishable luxuriance almost to the waist seemed to belie. No need to ask in whose presence I stood, as I bowed myself before one who is the object of a devotion and love which kings might envy and emperors sigh for in vain!¹



Entrance to the shrine of Baha'u'llah

Over subsequent days, Browne was in the presence of Baha'u'llah several more times for twenty minutes to half an hour each time. Regarding one of these interviews, Browne wrote:

“He again insisted very strongly on the necessity of unity and concord amongst the nations, and spoke of the *Sulh-i-Akbar* [The Great Peace] which will come soon...There must be one language and one writing. The former may be either one of those existing, or one invented for the purpose by a conference of savants of all countries. All nations must bind themselves to combine and put down any nation which attempts to disturb the general peace.”²

During His last days, Baha'u'llah called the believers to His bedside in Bahji where He stressed the importance of maintaining the unity of the community.³ Shortly thereafter, on 29 May 1892, eight hours after sunset, Baha'u'llah passed away in His seventy-fifth year. The news was telegraphed to Sultan 'Abdu'l Hamid, who authorized the interment of His earthly remains within the precincts of the mansion. Shortly after sunset on that same day, He was laid to rest in a room at the northwestern corner of the row of dwellings to the west of the mansion.⁴

This resting place constitutes the most holy place on the face of the globe for Bahai's, and the central focus of pilgrimage, its significance being comparable to that of the Temple remains in Jerusalem for

Jews or the Kaaba at Mecca for Muslims. Baha'i believers turn their hearts and faces toward this most sacred spot during the recitation of their daily obligatory prayers and aspire to make a pilgrimage there at least once in their lifetime. The tomb is open for public visitation during regular hours.



Gardens surrounding the shrine of Baha'u'llah

The Gardens

The extensive formal gardens surrounding the shrine and the mansion are today a place of tranquility and beauty characterized by a meditative atmosphere and a capacity to lift the spirit. Attracting native birds and fauna as well as public visitors, the gardens radiate from the central hub formed by the shrine and mansion. The radial paths are covered with crushed red roof tiles, bordered with rows of santolina and floral plantings. In contrast, the main approach arriving from the north is laid with smooth, white pebbles from the shore of the Sea of Galilee. The geometrical lines are accented by rows of cypress and araucaria trees, while at the detail level, the gardens are embellished with gilded wrought-iron gates, sculpted hedges and bushes, urns, lamps, and star-shaped floral plantings complemented with rye grass during the cooler months. Part of the property is covered with an olive grove dating back at least a century, which continues to be harvested in the traditional way.

Other Buildings on the Site

The mansion once occupied by Baha'u'llah is an outstanding example of Ottoman architecture, which has been carefully restored and is maintained in peak condition. The ground floor is composed of spacious rooms with high ceilings, surrounded on the north, west and south sides by an arcade and a walled garden. The upper floor is reached through a door on the east side of the building which opens to an interior staircase. After passing through a short corridor, the view of the upper area opens to a large central hall paved with marble and flooded with light from a clerestory supported by eight marble columns, in the manner of an inner courtyard. Shoghi Effendi furnished this area with displays of documentation, artifacts and models illustrating the community's achievements and opened it to the public as a museum in 1929. Spacious rooms branch out from the hall, including the room occupied by Baha'u'llah in the southeast corner. A large balcony which runs above the arcade is decorated with striking wall frescoes and offers views to the Mediterranean Sea and Mount Carmel. Slender marble columns around the balcony support the outer edge of the roof, while a sitting area with a marble fountain is screened with stained glass panels.⁵

Originally constructed as a single-story dwelling around 1821, the mansion was purchased in 1868 by 'Udi Khammar, a Christian Arab merchant from Acre, who spent what must have been a considerable sum transforming the building into a palace with spacious living quarters on the upper floor. Upon completion of the renovation, an Arabic inscription was placed above the doorway to the mansion presaging its future glory: "Greetings and salutations rest upon this mansion which increaseth in

splendor through the passage of time. Manifold wonders and marvels are found therein, and pens are baffled in attempting to describe them.”⁶ ‘Udi Khammar moved his family into the mansion in 1871, but passed away during an epidemic in 1879, his vision unrealized. His heirs hastily abandoned the place to escape the plague and were more than pleased to rent it to the family of Baha’u’llah, who took up residence in September 1879.⁷



The mansion of Bahji

In addition to the shrine and the mansion, significant outbuildings include the Pilgrim House and the Tea House, both modest structures built in a simple Ottoman style with whitewashed walls and blue shutters, and a small, square building just outside the ring of formal gardens, where Shoghi Effendi stored his plans and from whose roof he supervised the landscaping work. More recently, a gatehouse and visitors’ center, echoing the architectural style of the historic buildings, have been constructed near the public entrance to the property. In the future, it is anticipated that the tomb of Baha’u’llah will be embellished with a monumental superstructure.

¹ Momen, *The Babi and Baha’i Religions*, pp. 229-30.

² *Ibid.*, p. 231.

³ Samandarí, *Moments with Baha’u’llah*, pp. 29-37.

⁴ Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p. 222.

⁵ Ugo Giachery, *Shoghi Effendi*, pp. 141-3.

⁶ Taherzadeh, *Revelation of Baha’u’llah*, vol. 4, p. 104.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 101.