



# ISRAEL: A PERSONAL TRAVEL GUIDE

By Douglas E. Duckett  
Cincinnati, Ohio, USA  
Labatt@fuse.net

©2004-2017 Douglas E. Duckett  
All rights reserved.

## INTRODUCTION.

The Israel travel guide you are reading is a greatly expanded version of one I first prepared for an American friend some two decades ago. In it, I have tried to share my experiences and knowledge of Israel based on a lifetime of study and fifteen visits to the country, most recently in May 2016. I enjoy independent travel, and this guide was written primarily with such travelers in mind, though I hope the information will be helpful to those on group tours as well. As an American, I have produced a guide that, no doubt, reflects that identify and experience. I hope my readers from other countries will forgive that, and still find useful information to help plan their trips.

I am not in the travel industry. Rather, I am a labor lawyer who loves Israel passionately and wants to encourage others to travel there and experience this wonderful land. My first visit was in November 1988, and I caught the bug; thus I started visiting every other year or so thereafter, except for 2000-2004, the truly terrible years of the second Palestinian uprising and the terror bombings in Israel cities. Now, with partial retirement, I am going every year (God willing!). Even with the mostly peaceful conditions prevailing since then, some friends still asked, “are you sure you want to go back to Israel?” Of course, recent tensions in Jerusalem, with a wave of stabbing attacks on Israelis, have further increased those anxieties, even for me to some degree.

So, how do I answer that? Each trip has been a dream, and travel to Israel is one of the great joys of my life. The security situation is nothing like you imagine or fear. My trips have all been calm and peaceful, and while there is more security than you may be used to in North America or parts of Europe, I have never been afraid, and Israelis are not either. Even on our most recent trip, we found the country and even Jerusalem calm and very little affected, except for fewer tourists. Those knifing attacks have not targeted tourists, and most of the country has been almost completely unaffected. Even in tensor times, the streets of Jerusalem are safer than the street crime one would face in any major American city—before we get to the gun violence and mass shootings plaguing the US. So I encourage you not give in to irrational and uninformed fears, and don’t pay much attention to friends who have never been there who say “I can’t believe you’re going to Israel!!” Terror can happen anywhere, and does—New York, Madrid, London, Sydney, Ottawa, Paris—that sad list goes on—but those places are fundamentally safe, and so is Israel. Within hours of your arrival, you will wonder why you ever worried.

So go already! I hope you find the information I prepared about traveling in Israel and life in that country interesting and helpful in planning your trip.

This is a personal guide by an amateur writer, not a comprehensive, professional guide, so I have some suggestions for more detailed resources to help you prepare for the trip. In my view, the best guidebook remains **Frommer's Israel**. The last large edition was issued in November 2010, but a new and slimmer **Frommer's Easy Guide** was issued in 2014. **Fodor's Israel** is another good option. The Lonely Planet Guide for Israel is far weaker, with inaccuracies and significant bias against Israel. Avoid it. For an excellent look at life in this complex country, read **Donna Rosenthal's *The Israelis: Ordinary People in an Extraordinary Land***. It is the best book of its kind today. If you want to know more about the history of the country from a Palestinian perspective, I suggest **Sari Nusseibeh's *Once Upon a Country***. A magnificent book on the history of Jerusalem in particular is ***Jerusalem: A Biography* by Simon Sebag Montefiore**. It's an exhaustive but fascinating history of this city, which is holy to more people than any other on Earth.



One reason that print guidebooks are fading is because the Internet offers the most current and helpful information on travel, with unparalleled chances to learn from fellow travelers. **The best resource by far is the Israel travel forum and customer reviews of hotels and restaurants found on Trip Advisor ([www.tripadvisor.com](http://www.tripadvisor.com));** search for Israel forums to get there. I actually don't travel anywhere without consulting Trip Advisor. I'm a frequent poster on that forum (under the name "Douglas D") as you'll see, and we have many Israelis, including tour guides, who participate and help travelers. I blogged my most recent trip under "Douglas's Trip Report -- May 2016"—search for that term, and you'll find reports by city, and past trip reports are under "Labatt's Trip Reports." The forum is a great place to pose questions and get answers from people with experience in the country, often within hours. I have friends and contacts all over Israel now thanks to Trip Advisor! Of course, you probably found me through that forum. Of course, Trip Advisor neither endorses nor is in any way responsible for the content of this guide.

A podcaster and travel writer named Chris Christensen has a wonderful, Internet interview program on travel at [www.amateurtraveler.com](http://www.amateurtraveler.com). My podcast interview on Israel travel is Episode 167, and I also did an interview focusing specifically on Jerusalem at Episode 192. Check out his site for other travels, by the way—it's extraordinary and a labor of love.

Where I recommend specific hotels, restaurants, or guides in this guide, **all I ask is that you tell them that Douglas Duckett of Cincinnati, Ohio in the United States sent you.** I do not get compensation, commissions, or kickbacks from these people, but I do like them to know I made the referral, so *please* let them know. Other than considering a donation to the YMCA as I suggest below, that is all I ask for providing you this information. There are many other wonderful people and places in Israel, to be sure, but I only list here what I have personally experienced, unless otherwise noted. As noted above, I don't hold this out as a comprehensive guide, and when I call it a "personal guide," it is exactly that. The opinions expressed in it are mine alone, and so are any mistakes. But you have to admit, the price is right!

Finally, before proceeding to my specific recommendations, many people to whom I have sent this guide over the years have asked if they can pay me for it. I have always declined that. But if you do find this information useful, please consider making a donation of \$25 or more to the **Jerusalem International YMCA** for its Jewish-Arab kindergarten and preschool program, called "**Gan ha-Shalom**," and please tell them that I sent you. The Jerusalem International YMCA offers interfaith programs that emphasize reconciliation and co-existence in this troubled

land, and its work is remarkable. It was even nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize at one point. You'll read more about it later in this guide. But I am particularly passionate about Gan ha-Shalom, a program that is committed to building bridges of understanding across the Jewish-Arab divide while children are young and have not yet learned to hate or fear. It is truly remarkable, and many families, particularly Arab families, cannot afford the more than \$8,000 USD annual tuition, threatening the multicultural nature of the program. Please be generous. **The best way to do this is through the Friends of the Jerusalem International YMCA website at [www.friendsofjiv.org](http://www.friendsofjiv.org). Click "Give," and then click "Select a designation," then click "Peace Preschool." In the comments section, please write that you are making the donation in honor of Douglas Duckett's guidebook.**



For more information about the Jerusalem International YMCA and its other, vital programs, see [www.jerusalemymca.org](http://www.jerusalemymca.org). Thanks for considering a donation to this very worthy cause. And for my Jewish and Muslim readers, I assure you that the YMCA offers programming for Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike; has members from all three communities; has an Israeli Jewish CEO and before that its first Arab Muslim CEO; and has a varied and integrated staff and a board that is carefully balanced between Jews, Christian and Muslim Arabs, and

expatriates who are living in Jerusalem. This organization is a very good friend to and resource for Israel and all of the communities that make up the rich mosaic that is Jerusalem.

## GETTING THERE.

You have a number of carriers to choose from in flying to Israel. Obviously El Al Israel Airlines serves the country with the most flights. El Al flies directly from New York-JFK, Newark, Los Angeles, and Boston. The cost is competitive and El Al offers the most frequent flights, plus an early start to your Israel experience.



I also rank El Al's rigorous security measures as a plus, though the process can feel intrusive. On the negative side, El Al may have less solicitous service and seemingly a more chaotic clientele, including ultra-Orthodox men who sometimes balk at sitting next to women. Note that I have not flown El Al in over two decades, and I have heard the service has improved since then. But remember that El Al does not fly on Shabbat, the Jewish Sabbath, which runs from Friday sundown to Saturday sundown. This can cut into your available vacation time, particularly if you need to time your trips to start and end on weekends. I flew El Al the first two times, largely for patriotic reasons, but have since found other airlines more convenient.



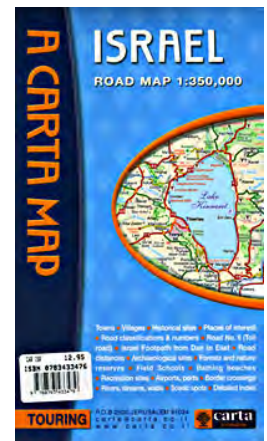
Delta Air Lines offers nonstop flights from New York/JFK to Ben Gurion Airport and back. I have flown this route many times now and really like it. United (formerly Continental) also offers non-stop flights to Israel from Newark, and I've heard that is a good option. For Canadian (and even American) readers, Air Canada offers convenient, nonstop services from Toronto (and El Al also serves Toronto).

Lufthansa, Air France, KLM, and British Airways also serve Israel, and they are easy to connect to in Europe via various American carriers. With tourism to Israel booming again, other options may become available. But note: Israel is not the most competitive market for airfares, and flights are expensive.



## GETTING AROUND.

If you can afford it, I highly recommend renting a car and driving yourself for at least part of the trip. It is the best way to see Israel, particularly if you will be touring Galilee and the countryside or the desert south. Israel is very small (about the size of New Jersey), and nothing is very far apart (except for Eilat, at the southern tip of the country on the Red Sea). Indeed, you could drive from the northernmost tip to Eilat in five to six hours, though no one would ever do that since there are so many wonderful places in between. Most road signs are in English as well as Hebrew and Arabic, and it is fairly easy to get around, at least outside the cities. By renting a car, you are not slave to bus schedules or someone else's idea of what you should see and when. That said, bus service is quite extensive, inexpensive, and a good option for intercity travel, and you can even put your luggage underneath in the cargo hold. Trains are also an option for some routes, and you can read more on both below.



If you are renting a car, definitely do so on-line before you leave; you will save a lot of money over waiting to rent once you arrive in Israel. I strongly recommend an Israeli company called **Eldan** for rental cars. On my last several trips, they had by far the best rate, with a 20% discount for Internet bookings through [www.eldan.co.il](http://www.eldan.co.il), and I have found the service excellent. Eldan also has a hotel in Jerusalem next to the YMCA; you can book the hotel with the car as a package deal. **Hertz, Avis, and Budget** also offer rental cars in Israel. Book through each company's Israel web site (with the suffix .co.il), *not* the US sites or third-party sites, as you may not get the full price including the required insurance. I have used Avis in the past and was happy with it; see [www.avis.co.il](http://www.avis.co.il). **Budget** is a newer player in Israel, and I used them in 2006, getting a great rate at [www.budget.co.il](http://www.budget.co.il). I had a very bad customer-service experience with Budget's Tel Aviv office, however, and others have recently reported negative experiences. At all costs, avoid **Sixt**—that company has **scores of negative reports** on Trip Advisor! I note that **Thrifty** and some other American operators now have a presence in Israel through local franchisees, but reports have been mixed. I would stick with Eldan. **Note:** You probably don't need an international driver's license as long as your license has the information in Latin letters. If not, you may need to obtain the international driver's license, which basically translates the information into English. But confirm what you need directly through your rental car company.

Most US credit cards do not offer "CDW" coverage for rental cars in Israel, which allows visitors to avoid part of the expensive insurance coverage sold by the car rental companies. There are exceptions—**MasterCard World Cards** do offer the CDW coverage, and I have one for just this purpose. **Chase and some Citi credit cards** in the US now offer CDW in Israel as well. Unless you have a card that offers CDW, you will need to purchase a package of vehicle insurance plus the third-party liability insurance, and this adds to already high costs. (**Note:** even if your credit card provides CDW coverage, you *always* have to purchase third-party liability coverage, which is usually coded "LI." For Canadian readers, more Canadian bank cards seem to offer CDW coverage in Israel—check to be sure.) If your card does offer CDW, you will need to bring written verification of that coverage with you; my company sends me a .pdf letter to that effect upon request through the customer service line.



I have another suggestion to reduce both costs and hassles. If you follow the itinerary I recommend, starting your trip in Tel Aviv and ending in Jerusalem, you won't really need or even want a car in either of those cities. Both are quite confusing to drive in, city traffic is far worse than in the countryside, and trust me—parking is a total nightmare. So you can rent the car for pick up in Tel Aviv on the day you leave the city to head north (or south), and then drop it off once you arrive in Jerusalem, or vice versa. All the car rental companies have offices in both cities. This cuts costs and saves stress. I have done this for years now and never missed having a car in Tel Aviv or Jerusalem. Cab or bus fares are far less than rental costs for those days.

Ask for air conditioning—you'll need it in warmer months or areas. If you can drive a stick shift, they are less expensive. On two trips, I was given an automatic at no extra cost even though I rented a manual, so that may be a trend, but you obviously can't count on it. Rental costs generally are high, particularly with the required insurance—as much as \$300-500 USD for a two-week period for a subcompact manual. Larger cars cost more—on my 2012 trip, I paid \$309 for a Mazda 6 for just six days. I still find the convenience worth it. Be aware that rental cars (at least the cheaper ones) are a lot smaller than the cars that most North Americans are used to driving. For Europeans, it will be no surprise. Gasoline is also very expensive in Israel (as in Europe)—about twice as high or more than in the US—but the country is so small that you won't use that much. On my recent trips, we drove all over and refilled no more than two or three times.



Be aware when driving that there are no formal borders or markers as such to mark the limits of the occupied West Bank, nor is it typically indicated on Israeli road maps. Israelis call the old border between the territories conquered in 1967 and Israel proper “the Green Line” (because it was green on the pre-1967 maps). The most up-to-date maps from the Israel Government Tourist Office (which you can get for free through the Internet) do show the areas under Palestinian control, but I find them hard to read. You can purchase great road maps from **Carta Israel** through [www.israel-catalog.com](http://www.israel-catalog.com) or [www.eisenbrauns.com](http://www.eisenbrauns.com); search for Carta products. The Carta Touring Atlas and Guide is wonderful as well; since it is in booklet form, it is easier to use in a car, and it also contains touring tips in the margins. Others prefer the more detailed **MAPA** maps, which are also terrific. Both have the areas under Palestinian control clearly marked, and a MAPA booklet map I bought recently shows the security barrier, which is basically the closest we now have to a “border” between Israel proper and the West Bank. That “seam line” between Israel proper and the West Bank is now far more evident on the ground than it used to be. Of course, Israel has completely withdrawn from the Gaza Strip, now under Hamas rule, and Gaza is closed to travel by tourists. In most places, the controversial security barrier, a high wall in some places, gives you an obvious indication where the Green Line is (or at least the point of Israeli control), but that barrier is not complete all the way around the West Bank. Even where there is no barrier, though, there are IDF checkpoints at the entrance to the territories. Accordingly, unlike twenty years ago, you can no longer just stumble into the West Bank without knowing. I urge caution in visiting the West Bank unless you are on an escorted tour, though it's safe to tour Bethlehem and Jericho, particularly with a guide but even on your own. I also toured Hebron with a guide on my last two trips and felt safe, though Hebron has been the focal point of attacks on Israelis in recent months, so I would not go at this writing (mid-2016). Second, it is safe to drive on your own to Masada through the West Bank from Jerusalem on Highway 1, then south on Route 90 along the Dead Sea, or to drive Route 90 south from Tiberias to the Dead Sea through the Jordan Valley. I have taken latter route several times, and the drive was both lovely and quiet. Generally, you can drive your Israeli rental car in the West Bank, but

it is flatly prohibited to take an Israeli rental car into Palestinian cities and adjacent areas designated as “Area A” in the Oslo Accords. (Route 90/Highway 1 as discussed above are in Area C, under total Israeli security control.) If driving elsewhere in the West Bank, check with your rental car company on any specific restrictions. Even if covered, use good sense, and ask locals before setting out. You can take an Arab cab or Arab bus from Jerusalem for the short trip into Bethlehem; more information on that in the Jerusalem section later in this guide.

Israeli drivers are more daring and aggressive than what most North Americans are used to, at least outside of cities like New York, Chicago, or Los Angeles. People worry about terrorism when traveling to Israel, but road accidents are more of a risk. That said, driving in Israel is very possible to do; I’ve done it on all but two of my fifteen trips. I have found no problem driving in the countryside between cities, but driving in the cities, especially Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, can be nerve-wracking (and is simply not worth it). To some degree, you have to drive like the locals to get anywhere. If you wait patiently for someone to let you in at a merge, for instance, you may be there a long time!

**A note on using a GPS.** You can rent a GPS or use your smartphone for driving directions in Israel (assuming you have a data plan). The two best phone apps are Google Maps and Waze (an Israeli product). (I far prefer Google Maps on my Samsung Galaxy phone; the app even has traffic indicators. Even though Waze speaks in English, the maps are in Hebrew, a problem for most visitors.) The problem with any English-language GPS system, however, is in the spelling, which can make them confusing and cumbersome to use. While there is only one way to spell a city or a road in Hebrew, there may be a half-dozen ways to transliterate that into English. For example, is it “Caesarea” or “Kesaryia” or “Qesarya”? (Road signs use all three—and more.) A few years back, when I entered into Garmin (which I then used) an address on King David Street, one of Jerusalem’s major streets on which the King David Hotel, the YMCA, and all the rental car offices are located, nothing came up. When I entered “King,” I had a whole bunch of other streets, but not King David Street. When I entered just “David,” there was no “King David Street,” but “David ha-Melech Street” did turn up. Now, I speak Hebrew and happen to know that is how you say “King David” in Hebrew, but a non-Hebrew speaker would be flummoxed. So, unless you understand at least enough Hebrew to make educated guesses, I would use maps and free programs and certainly not pay extra for a GPS. I do note, however, that on my most recent trip, Google Maps worked like a charm with very few problems.

**Hiring Tour Guides.** If driving makes you nervous, you might consider hiring a guide to drive you for at least a good segment of the trip, with free days in some cities. This works particularly well if you have a group of three or four or more, where the cost can be shared. **Madeleine Lavine, based in Jerusalem, is my absolute favorite guide,** and she is licensed to drive tourists throughout Israel. You can contact her at [madl@zahav.net.il](mailto:madl@zahav.net.il), or at (02) 678-0058 or (054) 450-4098. **I also love touring with Jonathan (Yonatan) Kohn,** a former American based in Tel Aviv who is also licensed to drive tourists (tel. (054) 554-3448; [jonskohn@hotmail.com](mailto:jonskohn@hotmail.com)). **David Wexler** is another driving guide who frequently helps people on Trip Advisor. He is another former American who works with both individuals and groups, including a lot of Christian groups; see [david@davidsland.com](mailto:david@davidsland.com); [www.davidsland.com](http://www.davidsland.com); cell (054) 330-0941. On my last trip, I used a guide named **Richard Woolf**, whom Madeleine Lavine has long recommended, and he was just terrific. Richard hails from the UK originally, and you can contact him at [woolfr@netvision.net.il](mailto:woolfr@netvision.net.il), tel. 04-693-5377, cell 050-589-4647, website:

[www.safed.co.il/woolfguide.html](http://www.safed.co.il/woolfguide.html). While he lives and most often works in the North, he tours elsewhere as well, and is knowledgeable and wonderful to spend time with. Another guide based in the North but touring all over is **Moti Bar-Tuv** ([moti@travel-israel.info](mailto:moti@travel-israel.info); (052) 226-8331; from the United States at (213) 293-3794). Moti is a native Israeli with excellent English and a great guide, and he works a great deal with cruise ship visitors. On my last trip, I met a newer guide **Russell Abel**, previously an engineer by trade and originally from South Africa, and he is a lovely, enthusiastic, and very good tour guide. I can recommend him warmly based on my time with him touring Zichron Ya'akov, and you can reach him at (050) 666-6981 or [Russell@russell.co.il](mailto:Russell@russell.co.il).

Finally, if you don't rent a car, consider using a *sherut*, an inter-city group taxi, to travel from the airport to Jerusalem or Haifa, or between some cities. (Sheruts don't run between the airport and Tel Aviv because the private taxi fare is not that high.) Sheruts leave as soon as they fill up with passengers after any flight. They will either take you directly to your hotel (in some order, of course) or to the central bus station for the city, from which you can either take another cab or a bus to your hotel. (Ask which they will do first so you're not surprised.) They don't cost much more than taking a bus (about ₪69 NIS or \$18 USD from the airport to Jerusalem), and it's quicker. (The currency symbol for the New Israeli Shekel (NIS) is ₪, used like \$ or €) You can also get a sherut back to the airport, and you can arrange this through your hotel. Or course, taxi service is also available, but at a higher cost. A taxi should run about ₪273 (\$71 USD) to the airport from Jerusalem for weekdays; ₪325 (\$84 USD) for evenings, Shabbat, or holidays; there are also small surcharges per-bag or for extra passengers. Maximum rates are about ₪144 (\$37 USD) from Tel Aviv; ₪163 (\$42 USD) on evenings, Shabbat, or holidays. In both Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, some sheruts also run on fixed routes within the cities, and there is some intercity sherut service, particularly between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. Rates can change, and currency conversion rates were current as of May 2016. Also, a usage note: the plural of the word "sherut" in this context is not "sherutim." Those are toilets. In Hebrew, the plural would be "moniot sherut" ("service taxis"). Ask for "sherutim," and you are likely to be surprised. ☺



For travel within and between the cities, the **bus system** is widely used and fairly easy to navigate. Your hotel can help you identify the needed route; you can also post an inquiry on the Trip Advisor forum, because the Israelis who post there are remarkably helpful. Egged is the main company (see logo at left.) For bus information from all the companies, see [www.bus.co.il](http://www.bus.co.il). **But it is not practical to tour the north of the country, the desert areas of the Negev, or the Dead Sea/Masada area using public transport and buses alone.** For those areas, you need a rental car, group tour, or driving guide. But to get from one city to another, or anywhere within the cities, buses are a very practical—and safe—option.



On two recent trips, I traveled by **train** from Haifa in the north to Be'er Sheva in the Negev region and found that Israel Railways is a delightful way to transit the country. Consider that option when you don't need the rental car at your destination, though a company like Eldan has offices all over the country. On one trip, I took the train from Tel Aviv to Haifa as well. You can check out routes, timetables, and prices at [www.rail.co.il/EN](http://www.rail.co.il/EN). I suggest that you spend the extra ₪5.00 (\$1.30 USD) to get a seat in the reserved car, called "makom shamur" in Hebrew. It is well worth it, as the regular cars can be packed, particularly around the weekends when soldiers travel for free. Unfortunately, the reserved car tickets are not available during peak travel times on Friday or early Sunday mornings—when they are most needed!



**Taxis** are also plentiful, and be advised that taxi drivers are **required by law** to use the meter for travel within the cities. Some drivers may attempt to avoid this by simply not turning it on and quoting you a fixed rate in shekels. While quoting a fixed rate is perfectly appropriate for going to the airport, for intercity trips, or for trips where you are asking the driver to stop and wait for you, it is neither advisable nor legal for drivers to insist on a fixed rate for a simple trip within the city. You will nearly always do better for trips within a city if you use the meter, so *insist* that the driver turn on the meter. Get out without paying if the driver refuses, as is your right—the driver is breaking the law by refusing. Don't be bullied. All the drivers understand some English, but you can say in Hebrew, “taf'il et ha-moneh, bevakasha” (“turn on the meter please”). Or just ask for a receipt (“kabbalah” in Hebrew); they have to use the meter to generate a receipt. The problem is less endemic than it used to be, but stick to your guns and make sure that that meter has been turned on. In Jerusalem, I recommend a driver **David Mizrachi at (054) 481-6950**; he is honest, fun to chat with (though his English is limited), and very interesting. Other good choices are **Yehuda Levi, (052) 240-7080** and **Lior Dabush, (050) 955-9505**. In Tel Aviv, I recommend **Beny at (054) 303-0700** and **Ofer (054) 545-5205**. But you can simply grab a cab on the street or through your hotel—just make sure that the driver turns the meter on! You will pay slightly more if you or the hotel calls for the cab, rather than flagging one on the street, but it's a small surcharge. **And note—it is not customary in Israel to tip cab drivers** unless they perform a special service, like carrying bags into the building. If you give a cab driver ₪60 for a ₪59 fare, he will look for a shekel coin to give you; you can tell him to round up if you'd like.

**Uber** is not yet legal in Israel, but may be coming. In the meantime, there is a great app called **Gett** that you can download to request and pay for cabs—very convenient!

## WHEN TO GO.

This depends on several different factors. First, of course, it depends on your schedule and when you can travel, perhaps including school breaks. But you should also consider the weather in Israel, what kind of experience you are looking for, costs (peak and off-season), and the calendar of Jewish and Christian holidays (the latter relevant because of outside tourists; the Christian population in the country is very small, and Christian holidays are not observed in Israel).

Let's start with the weather. Israel has only two primary seasons with “shoulder seasons” in between. The summer is from May to October. During that time, it is warm to hot and sunny every day and almost never rains. Sometime in October or November, the “winter” begins with the arrival of the rains (very welcome in this parched land), and this lasts until sometime in March or April. We had a surprising amount of rain on one October visit, unusual for that time of year, but that is rare indeed and we still were able to do and see nearly everything we wanted. If you are watching costs, November can be a less expensive time to visit, but the weather can be less predictable. Of my five November trips, I had flawless weather and even unusually warm weather for four of them; on one, I had quite a bit more rain, including major blocks over several days and temperatures in the 50s F (low teens C). In November, take light sweaters and a light jacket, but remember to take hats for the sun, which can still be intense. March can also be quite nice, with wildflowers blooming in the countryside after the winter rains, though it can be cool. I went in March for my last trip and loved it, despite some rain—green vegetation carpeting what



will soon be barren desert hillsides! If you go in December through February, know that the weather can be quite cool, wet, and even nasty. Snow is rare (and only in the higher elevations, such as Jerusalem), but temperatures in the 40s F (single digits Celsius) with rain are common—and many places lack central heating, making the room *cold!* From May through mid-October, rain will not be a problem. I have made three trips in late June, and it can be hot, but not generally brutally so. May is a *wonderful* time to go, unless like one friend you have allergies to olive tree pollen, because they're in full bloom then. Temperatures are generally in the 70s F (high 20s C) every day except occasional heat waves, and the evenings are just delightful. The temperatures were also quite nice in October, though more variable. Even in the summer, we have sometimes needed a light jacket for evenings in Jerusalem, which remained lovely. July and August will be quite hot, even brutally so, and more crowded, because that is when families travel. The climate is basically very similar to Southern California. At the Dead Sea or Eilat, though, it is warm to hot year around, and extremely hot in the summer, like Arizona.

Despite the hot weather, summer is peak season for Israel travel, with more crowding, higher hotel prices, and even minimum stays at some hotels. Unless July or August is the only time you can go, I recommend avoiding it. You will also find peak prices and crowding around the major Jewish holidays, especially in the fall with Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur through Sukkot and Simhat Torah, Passover in the spring, and Shavu'ot in the early summer. In Jerusalem in particular, prices also go up around Chanukah/Christmas and around Easter, which is usually (but not always) the same week of Passover. (And remember, there is the Latin/Western Easter and the Orthodox/Eastern Easter—and they can be the same or different Sundays!

In sum, my favorite times to visit Israel are from late April (after Easter and the end of Passover) through May, and late October (after Simhat Torah—search Google for the date in any particular civil year) through mid-November, with a recent affinity for green March. But you can have a good trip to Israel in any time of year.

## **BOOKING HOTELS.**

Hotels in Israel offer smaller, less opulent rooms than most North Americans are used to, and on top of that, in recent years hotel prices in Israel have skyrocketed. It is harder and harder to travel to Israel on a modest budget, but it is still possible to find good places at reasonable prices. When planning, just think of what it would cost to travel to New York or London, and you won't be as shocked.

**I book most of my hotels in Israel through a Tel Aviv-based travel agency called Regent Tours, affiliated with Isram.** I have consistently found that Regent Tours Isram, which contracts directly with hotels, can deliver lower prices than direct booking, even lower than Internet “discount” rates. It's certainly a whole lot easier than contacting each hotel individually. **You can call Anna Karic at Regent/Isram toll-free from the United States at (866) 383-6130. If calling within Israel, dial (03) 694-7777, or from other countries, dial 972-3-694-7777. You can also e-mail Anna at [regent@actcom.co.il](mailto:regent@actcom.co.il) or at [anna@isram.co.il](mailto:anna@isram.co.il), but if you can use the toll-free number, I suggest you call first.** Please mention that I sent you, and I also ask that you mention my referral if you book directly at any of the hotels I recommend. Just to give you options, another agency that can assist with booking hotel is **Beresheet-Genesis** with **Clive Newton**, [www.genesistourism.com](http://www.genesistourism.com), e-mail [clive.in.eilat@gmail.com](mailto:clive.in.eilat@gmail.com), tel. (972) 57-

776-0140; Clive is an active contributor on the Trip Advisor Eilat forum and is very helpful. His firm has special discounts for Eilat hotels. Whomever you use, I also recommend later confirming the reservation directly with the hotel as well to avoid any possible miscommunication on dates and details. Being too careful never hurt. Both agencies can also set you up with tour guides or groups, and can help organize bar and bat mitzvah trips for families.

## **SECURITY ISSUES.**

Security is a constant aspect of Israeli life, and I won't minimize it. Despite what you hear and read, however, you are safer in Israel than in most major American cities, and any mass terror-related incidents are exceedingly rare now, unlike the awful years of 2001-03. Recent stabbing attacks, primarily in Jerusalem, are disturbing, but tourists have never been the targets, though a handful have been caught up in attacks. But here is a sobering statistic. My hometown of Cincinnati, Ohio has had up to 80 homicides in a year out of a population of 350,000. Extrapolated to a population the size of Israel (about 8,000,000), that would be the equivalent of more than 1,600 dead in just one year. **Yet there have not been that many people killed in terror attacks in all 68 years of Israel's history combined!** And the per capita gun murder rate is more than four times higher in the US than Israel's homicide rate from all causes. Of course, we routinely now have mass shootings in the US. So where am I safer?

Every time I have traveled to Israel, I felt utterly safe at all times, even in earlier years when the situation was far worse. Neither I nor my travel companions were ever afraid. **Don't judge by the media image!** Just pay attention to the news when in Israel, ask for local advice on conditions in more sensitive areas, and use common sense. Remember that the war in Syria and ISIS are in Syria (and Iraq), not Israel. There have been wars with Gaza, but tourists have no reason to visit near there anyway. Yes, the Hamas rocket attacks were scary, but that war is long over. Even the tension in Jerusalem, which ebbs and flows, will not likely affect your visit significantly. On my most recent trip, we just avoided the Damascus Gate area in the Old City, which is easy to do while still seeing what most tourists want to see.

You will at times see armed soldiers or civil guards, some in uniform, some not. This does *not* mean something untoward is happening. It is just a fact of life in Israel, and you will get used to it. Some Israeli civilians carry pistols, especially in Jerusalem. Do what I do—if the locals around you look concerned, worry. Otherwise, don't. Some hotels and museums or other public places will have a security guard at the door who will check your bag, perhaps your ID, and you. It's a shame it has to be, but their presence makes me feel safer, not less so.

*Never* leave a bag or item of luggage unattended in Israel, at the airport or anywhere else, not even for a minute or two. If you do, you are both taking a risk and may well return to find that the bomb squad has arrived and blown up your bag. Similarly, when approaching many religious or political sites, or other public places, you will need to open any bags, back-packs, or purses for inspection, as noted above. It's routine, and you'll quickly get used to it.

At the airport (for your flight to Israel if on El Al; for any flight going out) you will be subjected to questioning by Israeli security agents, some of which may seem pointless, repetitive, and intrusive. I get asked where I learned Hebrew and for the names and addresses of all of my Israeli friends. It can be intense and even intimidating. Just answer honestly and keep your

cool—don't show attitude or irritation. They are looking for nervousness, unrest, and inconsistency (hence the repeated questions). Your bags may be searched, though the airport uses more sophisticated X-ray techniques these days behind the scenes, so you are less likely to be asked to open a bag. They may open it, as the TSA does at times in the US. But the experience is quite different from US airport security, and, frankly, it's far more effective. I've heard Israelis say that "you screen things. We screen people." Don't take it personally—the security agents cannot read minds or hearts. You also need to understand that there is an overt profiling aspect to Israeli security. If you have an Arabic name, are Muslim or "look Middle Eastern," or have visited Arab families or areas, you may be subject to more questioning and perhaps searches than others. If you are Jewish, it will probably be easier. Is this racist? Perhaps to some degree it is. Security doesn't know quite what to make of me as a non-Jew who speaks Hebrew, and in 1993 I was very upset when I was pulled out for two and a half hours of intensive questioning and a complete item-by-item search of my luggage, all because I had stayed with some Israeli Arab friends and don't otherwise fit the profile of Christian visitors to Israel. After the September 11 attacks, I would be far more understanding that Israelis don't have the luxury to debate the niceties of intrusive security in a world where there are so many people trying to kill them.



Do not try to photograph soldiers or military installations without permission. And while this is not a security issue, it is also not advisable to photograph Muslim Arabs or ultra-Orthodox Jews without asking for permission since many view photography of people as a violation of the commandment against graven images (or risking the evil eye). It is also simple courtesy not to treat people like a zoo exhibit. Also, don't take photos on Shabbat (the Sabbath) at the Western Wall or in very religious Jewish neighborhoods. In short, be respectful.

I suggest that you carry your passport or at least a photocopy of it with you at all times; you will often need it in circumstances you would not expect (checking into hotels, financial transactions, and going to some sites). I also recommend that you carry a small book bag/backpack big enough to carry your passport and wallet, a guide book, maps, a Bible (you'll see frequent references at historical sites), water, and miscellaneous day-trip items. (Of course, some of this you may be able to carry on your phone or tablet, but beware of theft issues as you would anywhere.) I carry my bag with me everywhere and know to start opening the zippers as I approach a security check point. Carry something that is fairly secure and can't be easily ripped off. While street crime in Israel remains far less than in the US, there are occasional pickpockets or thieves. On our 2005 trip, a thief lifted a digital camera out of a man's bag in the middle of an Old City walking tour. On our 2008 trip, my friend Joy's day-bag was either lost or stolen in Tel Aviv. Those were the most "dangerous" things I saw in fifteen trips traveling on my own all over the country. Things like that can happen anywhere, of course, and they do, far more often, in any major or American or European city. You're safe in Israel. You really are.

## MONEY CHANGING.



Israel's currency is the New Israeli Shekel, abbreviated NIS, and as noted above, the currency symbol is ₪. If you have an ATM card from a bank in the Cirrus or Plus networks, by all means convert your currency in Israel using an ATM. It is incredibly easy and a great deal. You simply insert your card, instructions flash up in English (or you choose English, usually a UK flag icon), and you enter in the number of shekels you want to withdraw. The system will automatically debit your checking account in dollars at the current conversion rate (as of May 2016, \$1.00 USD = ₪3.87). You can also change cash at authorized money changing stores or the post office, but why risk carrying lots of cash? And traveler's checks have gone out of fashion for a good reason—they are a pointless hassle! I don't think that many places even accept them anymore.



One advantage tourists from abroad have is that we are exempt from paying the 17% value added tax (VAT) on hotel rooms or any meals or bar bills charged to the hotel room. So, when buying meals or drinks in your hotel, charge them to your room rather than paying cash or using a credit card. Most Israeli hotels and restaurants accept major credit cards. Note, though, that Visa, MasterCard, and American Express all charge “foreign currency conversion fees” that they often fail to disclose. (**Capital One does not charge such a fee** and even absorbs Visa's separate fee—a major plus.) At as much as 3%, this charge adds up, and is a major irritant to me. Banks usually charge that same fee for ATM withdrawals; still, the ATM route is far more convenient, and this fee is still less than the commission charged to convert traveler's checks. Just check with your bank on fees so you will know up front what you will be paying. Note that Israeli bank ATMs do not charge flat, per-transaction fees, but stand-alone, non-bank ATMs may do so. And before you leave, notify your bank and your credit card companies of your travel plans so that the fraud unit doesn't freeze your cards because someone is using them in Israel! You may also wish to ask your bank to increase the amount you can withdraw through an ATM per day as lower limits might restrict what you need. And if you have a lot on deposit, ask them to waive the foreign currency transaction fees on ATM withdrawals, or set up an account with **Capital One 360** or another bank that does not charge those fees.



## TIPPING.

Tipping is less universal and customary in Israel than it is in North America and much of Europe. But it is more common than it used to be, so here are some guidelines:

- In **restaurants**, where service is not included in the bill (usually clearly indicated, and almost always not included), tip 12-15%. You can leave more, of course, but Israelis don't routinely tip at the customary 15-20% rate found in North America. While some restaurants are now allowing customers to add the tip to a credit card bill, I leave cash so that the server actually gets it.
- In **taxis**, do not tip but you can round up to the next shekel or 10 shekels, if the fare is something like ₪59. If you don't say something, the driver will hunt for a one-shekel coin. If the driver does a lot of extra work, such as carrying bags into the hotel, or



otherwise went “beyond the call,” then tip as you would at home.

- For **housekeepers in the hotel**, I tip ₪10-12 per day. It may not be customary, but these are among the lowest paid workers in Israel, and the tips are appreciated.
- **Sherut** (group taxi) drivers are not tipped. This is like taking a bus.
- For **tour guides**, if they are self-employed, no tip is expected, but if I loved the guide, I might tip around 10-15%. If the guide is employed by a larger company, a tip in that amount is customary. On a big bus tour, it is customary to tip the guide ₪25-40 daily and the bus driver in the range of ₪12-20 daily, per person.

## PACKING.

Obviously, you should try to pack conservatively for a long trip, and if you do forget something, it's pretty easy to buy it in Israel (though prices may be higher). Airlines are now charging a lot for baggage in excess of the weight limits, so beware! That said, I confess that I'm a congenital excess packer—but even I got it down to 42 lbs. on a two-week spring trip. If I can do it, you can! Some can even do carry-on only; I cannot.



Even in the summer, do not pack too many pairs of shorts—at most holy places neither women nor men can gain admittance in shorts. Overall Israelis wear shorts less often than Americans, particularly women. Shorts are fine outside of religious sites, but the shorts-and-sneakers look may identify you as American if you care about that. On my most recent trip, I showed up looking like that, and a dear Israeli friend asked—with a smile—“Could you look any more American?!” On days when you will be touring religious sites, legs and shoulders *must* be covered, for both men and women. For women, that means skirts or dresses below the knee or long slacks are required, especially at Muslim sites. A shawl or light shirt or jacket that can be thrown over a sleeveless blouse or dress will also work. Capris are fine if they go to at least mid-calf. For men at religious sites, wear long pants and shirts that cover shoulders and upper arms. But in secular areas, less conservative attire is perfectly fine. In Tel Aviv, almost anything goes!

Don't pack formal clothes unless you know you need them for some reason, say a very formal business function. Israelis tend to dress quite informally, though consciously and with style. (I'm reminded of David Sedaris's comment that “Americans would be respected more abroad if they didn't go out looking like they were out to cut the grass.”) I usually pack one dress shirt and maybe one tie, just in case, but never a suit or sport coat. Even at the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra, I felt just fine in nice pants and a dressier shirt, and some members of the audience dressed far less formally than that! I have never needed more formal clothes at a restaurant, and I often eat at upscale places. A nice shirt and slacks or a skirt or dress will serve you anywhere.



Men will need to cover their heads when entering a Jewish holy site, either with a hat or a *kippa*, also called a skullcap (English) or *yarmulke* (Yiddish). This is true whether or not the men are Jewish. Cardboard ones are always available, but those are really tacky. You can buy an inexpensive *kippa* on the street in Jerusalem, so even if you're not Jewish, pick one up. But a ball cap or other hat is adequate; men simply need to cover their heads.

## CULTURAL TIPS.

Israel is an amazingly diverse place. Jews from over a hundred countries have come here, bringing their own cultures and traditions. Also, of course, there is a large Arab population as well, and other, smaller ethnic groups. This makes for a culture that is *very* complex, but infinitely rich and interesting. It is one of the things I truly love about the country. As one Israeli friend, originally from the US, said, “Americans think of themselves as a ‘melting pot,’ but we’re more like a salad. The cucumber still knows it’s a cucumber, and a tomato knows it’s a tomato. But toss us together in a little lemon juice and olive oil, and we make something wonderful and delicious.” What a delightful summary of the wonderful diversity that is Israel!

### The Jewish Population.

Israel is the world’s only Jewish state, and it was founded in 1948 as a restored homeland for the Jewish people after nearly nineteen centuries in exile. Zionism is the modern, political movement to re-establish a Jewish nation in *Eretz Yisrael* (the Land of Israel or Palestine), and the movement began in earnest in the late 1800s, led by a brilliant visionary named Theodor Herzl, a secular and assimilated Viennese Jew who was so shocked by the anti-Semitism he saw in “enlightened” France during the Dreyfus trial that he concluded that anti-Semitism was an incurable cancer in Christian Europe, and that the only answer was for Jews to have their own state. In my view, the frightening resurgence of anti-Semitism in Europe in this century proves that he was right.



So, while Jews had longed for two millennia to return and there was always a significant Jewish presence in Eretz Yisrael, waves of immigrants inspired by persecution or dreams of a restored Jewish homeland (each wave referred to as an *aliyah*) began to return and settle the land, mainly in the Galilee, the coastal plain, and the Jerusalem area, but throughout the country as well. That movement was given a major boost when the United Kingdom, soon to become ruler of the country after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I, endorsed the establishment of a Jewish national home in Palestine in the Balfour Declaration in 1917. Increasingly, the Jewish pioneers came into conflict with the resident Arab population, and this eventually triggered a corresponding national awakening among people who would later become known as the Palestinians.

Zionism had many streams, often at sharp odds with each other. The most dominant was the Labor Zionists, led by well-known figures such as David Ben-Gurion, Chaim Weizmann, and Golda Meir. This movement was socialist in orientation, sharply secular, and created the kibbutz movement. It went on to become the Labor Party, which would govern the State of Israel for its first three decades. On the right was the Revisionist Movement, with leaders such as Ze’ev Jabotinsky and Menachem Begin, which sought to establish the Jewish State through dramatic, bold means. Some elements of that movement adopted terrorist methods to resist British rule, such as the Irgun and Lehi/Stern Gang. The Revisionist movement eventually evolved into today’s Likud Party. And there was also a Religious Zionist movement which saw the establishment of even a secular Jewish state as part of God’s redemptive plan. While nearly all Jews are Zionist today, this was not true in the pre-State years, and many Orthodox and even some Reform Jews fiercely opposed Zionism. The anti-Zionist Orthodox saw it as a betrayal of the belief that only the Messiah could return the Jewish people to sovereignty in Eretz Yisrael; the anti-Zionist Reform saw it as a betrayal of their universalist world view, where being Jewish

was a faith, not a national identity.

Today, Jews comprise 76% of the population of Israel proper (excluding the West Bank and Gaza). While many are immigrants (especially from the former Soviet Union in the past 25 years), an increasing portion of the population was born there. The native-born are called “sabras,” so called after a native, prickly pear cactus that is “tough and prickly on the outside, but soft and sweet on the inside.” This is an apt metaphor for most native-born Israelis.

Ethnically, Israeli Jews are broadly grouped in two major categories—the Ashkenazim and the Sephardim. Ashkenazim, from the old Hebrew word for Germany (*Ashkenaz*), are Jews from western, central, and eastern European origin, including most North American Jews. Most of the original Zionist settlers and founders of the State of Israel came from this group, and they formed the cultural and political elite for most of the State’s early history. The Sephardim take their name from the Hebrew word for Spain (*Sepharad*). This term originally referred to Jews of Spanish origin, primarily the dispersion that followed the expulsion of Jews from Christian-ruled Spain in 1492. Later, the term was applied to all Jews of North African and Middle Eastern origin as well, including many Jews in Italy and the Balkans. After the founding of the State, the Arab countries expelled their large, centuries-old Jewish populations, and hundreds of thousands of Sephardim entered Israel, nearly tripling Israel’s population in just three years. Many Ashkenazim saw these new immigrants as culturally backward, and the Sephardim often resented what they saw as condescending, disrespectful, and discriminatory treatment by the Ashkenazi elite. The Sephardim first gained significant political power with the rise of the right-wing Likud party under Menachem Begin, and still are largely aligned with the Likud and Sephardi religious parties, most notably Shas. This remains a major fault line in Israeli cultural and political life. Many Sephardim from Middle Eastern or North African countries now prefer the term *Mizrachim*, meaning “eastern” Jews. As an aside, I love Mizrahi food, music, and traditions, and I appreciate their sometimes more tolerant and flexible approach to Judaism.

Two other groups are noteworthy. With the era of perestroika and the eventual fall of the Soviet Union, the gates of emigration were finally thrown open to the huge community of Soviet Jews. Since 1989, over a million Jews from the former Soviet Union have made *aliyah* (immigrated to Israel). They now make up roughly 20% of the Jewish population of Israel. While they are overwhelmingly Ashkenazi, integration has proven rough. Many were educated professionals arriving in a country already overly saturated with such talent and have been unable to find work in their fields (I’ve seen teachers working as hotel maids, as an example). Others are not Jewish according to *halakha* (Orthodox Jewish law) and are thus unable to marry Jews in religious ceremonies (the only way to get married in Israel, which still has no civil marriage option). One sees Russian signs frequently, and you will also hear the language spoken on the street.

Another fascinating group is the Ethiopian Jews. By tradition, this ancient community of black Jews traces its origin to the union of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, and this faithful community did not even know that other Jews existed until the late 1800s. In the 1980s and 1990s, virtually the entire community was brought to Israel in two huge airlifts, Operation Solomon and Operation Moses. In a matter of days in 1991, 35 El Al and Israel Air Force cargo flights airlifted the population to start a new life in the Jewish State. Seats were even taken out of planes to bring as many out as possible, and several babies were born in flight. As recounted in Donna Rosenthal’s *The Israelis*, Solomon Ezra, the Ethiopian-born Israeli coordinating the evacuation on the ground, asked the last

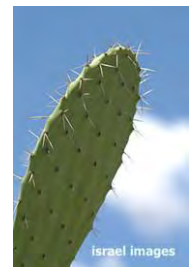


pilot out how many were on his plane, and he replied, “Over a thousand.” Stunned, Ezra warned him that this was impossible, that the plane could not take off with more than five hundred aboard. The pilot calmly replied, “It’s okay. I don’t want to leave any of my people behind.” Ezra said, “I never felt more proud to be an Israeli,” and that flight set the Guinness record for the number of passengers on one flight. (Every time I tell that story my eyes fill with tears.) Again, the reality of integration has proven tougher. The cultural, social, and educational gaps were at least as great as what faced the Sephardim, and add to that the issue of skin color and the resulting racism. Still, one sees evidence of Ethiopian Jews making their way in everyday Israeli life, including as soldiers. The Army has always been the great integrator of Israeli life.

The majority of Israelis are secular and not religious, let alone ultra-Orthodox. But you will see the ultra-Orthodox everywhere, distinctive mainly by the way the men dress—long, black coats, white shirts, often large hats, and side curls. Women will typically wear ankle length skirts, full sleeves, and for married women, either a wig, hat, or other covering to conceal their hair. In Hebrew, ultra-Orthodox Jews are known as *haredim*. Most haredi men will not speak to a woman they do not know, and many dislike dealing with tourists. Some extreme haredim even refuse to recognize the State of Israel, because only God, through the Messiah, should restore Jewish sovereignty in Eretz Yisrael. On the other hand, many observant Jews wear modern, Western dress, but the men will wear skullcaps at all times—these are the modern Orthodox, religious but not ultra-Orthodox. Many of them are nationalistic and right-wing on issues of peace and security, but you can’t assume that, though a hand-knitted *kippa* can be a clue. Reform and Conservative Jews are far less numerous and prominent in Israel than they are in North America, and these branches of Judaism unfortunately receive little or no legal recognition from the government. Israeli Jews tend to be either ultra-Orthodox (about 10-15%), modern Orthodox or traditional (15-30%), or secular and non-observant (the balance). There is no real separation of religion and state in Israel, and conflicts between the religious and secular, especially over military service and funding, create one of the major fault lines in Israeli society.

Most Israelis, Jewish or Arab, speak at least some English, and many do so fluently. If you are having trouble in a shop, ask the 12-year-old son or daughter of the shop owner who is studying English in school (mandatory as of second grade). But if you take the time to learn a few phrases in Hebrew, it will endear you to Israelis. They are very proud of their revived language.

Sometimes Americans, especially from the “heartland,” find Israelis abrasive and even rude at first blush. On the surface, I see why; the country values brash, blunt, open approaches to life. The key aspect of the Israeli character is that people are *direct*—remember that sabra definition—and especially for people like me from the Midwestern US, it takes some getting used to. It is common, for instance, to be asked how much money you make or how much you paid for something, and Israelis will be puzzled why we Americans would think that is private. Israelis also love an argument! But once you get past that surface impression, I find Israelis warm, open, and interesting, and extraordinarily generous and helpful when in need. Israelis truly engage in the lives of those around them—without the aloof distance of my “nice” world—and I have had near strangers offer to help me in a way that would really inconvenience them. I also learned that “nice” is relative, and I have come to value Israeli directness. At one dinner, a friend who is a law professor at Tel Aviv University noted that when studying at Harvard, he was puzzled at the American tendency to say, “Let’s get together some time.” He’d reply, “OK, when?” Then the evasions started. In Israel, when someone says that, he means it. He learned that Americans





often don't mean what they say; "niceness" can also mask shallowness or lack of connection.



Military issues and experiences dominate life in Israel to a degree unknown to most North Americans, at least outside of the disappearing World War II generation. Even in a post-September 11 world, that aspect of life in the United States or the rest of the Western world is nothing like what Israelis experience. Remember, in Israel, nearly everyone—male and female—serves for two and a half years of military service, then as much as a month each year in the reserves until their 40s. (Arabs and haredim studying full-time in yeshiva (seminary) are exempt from the draft, though the wholesale exemption for haredim has eroded a little.) For many Israelis, their social circles and key identities are built around the people with whom they served in the Army, much as many Americans make those life-long connections in university. They may continue to perform reserve duty with those same units for several weeks each year—for decades.

Israelis love to discuss politics and to argue, but as an outsider, please be cautious and sensitive. This is not the place to pontificate. Issues of peace and security are existential for Israelis—if they guess wrong, they may die. Nothing holds deeper emotion. Israelis are *very* sensitive to perceived criticism by outsiders, especially North Americans and Europeans, who can preach from a position of distance and relative safety. If you note how much money the US gives Israel, for example, you may be left speechless when a parent replies, “I gave my son.” My own politics on Israeli issues are center-left leavened with a heavy dose of realism and skepticism in recent years—and believe me, I am opinionated!—but I lay low and say things like, “It’s very complex,” and “this is an issue for the Israelis and the Palestinians to work out among themselves.” Really, the same is true when speaking with Arabs. The collapse of the peace process and the extreme violence that followed radicalized both Israelis and Palestinians, and both optimism and moderation are in scarce supply. Even many Israelis who once supported the peace process and concessions to the Palestinians have become very mistrustful and embittered. The Hamas takeover in Gaza, with ongoing violence and open warfare there despite the Israeli withdrawal, the conflicts with Hizbullah, threats from Iran, and the massive instability and violence in the Arab world after the failed “Arab Spring” have all further shattered those hopes. Like most Americans, I am an optimist by nature, but I am not optimistic here, at least in the near term. Few are still looking for “the new Middle East” anymore.

I do not have the space in this guide to talk in detail about the Jewish calendar, including the yearly cycle of holidays, but the guidebooks I have recommended and online sites do that well. The Jewish calendar sets the rhythm of Israeli life. But there is one “holiday” that occurs every week and will have a major impact on your travels, and that is Shabbat, the Jewish Sabbath. Beginning at sundown on Friday evening (Erev Shabbat) and ending with the spotting of the first stars on Saturday evening (Motzei Shabbat), everyday Israeli life slows down—and even shuts down to some degree—for Shabbat. Starting shortly after noon on Friday, you will notice the banks closing, shops being shuttered, and the rush of last minute shoppers in the markets getting ready for Shabbat. As the sun sets on Friday evening, you will see observant Jewish families making their way (on foot) to synagogue for the evening service. Car traffic thins, and in observant neighborhoods, stops altogether. Sirens sound at sundown throughout Jerusalem. Even most secular Jews (the majority) make it a point to be at home for the Friday evening family dinner, which is a special one. It is a beautiful part of Israeli life. I love the sense of the coming of



Shabbat in Israel, and we have nothing like it in North America or Europe.

On a practical level, many restaurants (and all kosher-certified ones) close for Shabbat and do not reopen until after darkness falls on Saturday. Banks are closed, and so are many venues of public entertainment, such as movies. There is no public transportation on Shabbat except in Haifa or Arab areas, though taxis and sheruts do still operate. Many observant Jews will not answer their telephones. So keep this in mind when planning your travels. Most of the national parks and many museums are open, but you should check. If you are inclined to tour Christian or Muslim sites, this is a good day to do so, because they remain open (though they may close on Sunday and Friday, respectively). Tel Aviv, the center of secular life in Israel, is far more “open” on Shabbat, but even in Holy Jerusalem, there are more and more pockets of secular defiance. It’s confusing, but it’s Israel.



As for the other holidays, I will mainly note that the fall is the major holiday season, with not only Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, but also Sukkot (the Festival of Booths) and Simhat Torah. Israelis love fall because they get a lot of time off in what is otherwise a five-and-a-half day work week for many people, but it can be an expensive and crowded time to visit the country. I suggest you travel before Rosh Hashanah (but it still could be quite hot) or after Simhat Torah (generally delightful weather). In the spring, be aware that if you travel over Passover (Pesach) and Easter (Latin and Orthodox), the country and its hotels will be crowded with tourists (including traveling Israelis), prices will be higher, and many restaurants will close because of the dietary restrictions of Passover. Shavuot (the Feast of Weeks, generally observed in June) is another major holiday, but a short one and therefore less disruptive to travel.

A final, practical tip: Know that if you suggest to an Israeli to have dinner at a restaurant, the expectation generally is that the one who invites will pay. But do look for chances to interact with real people. Historical sights and beautiful scenery are wonderful, but the heart of a country is its people, and they are the best part of any trip. Every trip has confirmed for me that truth.

## **The Arab Population.**

Arabs make up 20% of Israel’s population, and of that group, more than 90% are Muslim and the rest are Christian. I am talking here about the population within “the Green Line,” the pre-1967 borders of Israel, not including the territories occupied in the Six-Day War of 1967. These Arabs are full citizens of the State of Israel, vote and serve in the Knesset (the Israeli Parliament), and most speak Hebrew as well as their native Arabic. They are not drafted for service in the IDF (Israel Defense Forces), but can volunteer, as two of my young friends from Nazareth did in the 1990s. Arab citizens of Israel do suffer significant discrimination as you would expect. Their identity is a very complex one: one often hears “My country is at war with my people.” While the term “Israeli Arab” is common; now one also hears “Palestinian-Israeli” or “Palestinian citizen of Israel.” Arabs who live in the occupied territories are called simply “Palestinians” or “Palestinian Arabs.” By the way, like everything in Israel, these terms are very political. Israelis do not generally use the term “occupied territories” when describing the West Bank. Some Israelis on the left say “the administered territories” or simply “the territories” (my preferred term). Most Israelis—and all of the right—prefer the Biblical terms Judea and Samaria.

Sadly, the pressures of both the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the rise of Islamist extremism are

causing many Christian Arabs to emigrate, and that population is rapidly shrinking. This is true even in cities like Nazareth and Bethlehem, where Christians were once the majority but are no longer. Will Christianity survive in the land of its birth? It remains an open question.

If you have the opportunity to be hosted by Arabs, by all means do it. It will be an extraordinary experience. There are “hidden rules,” though, at least for those not familiar with Arab culture. I learned by breaking them—the most painful way, of course—so I’ll teach you some of them ahead of time.



Arab hospitality is extraordinary and can even be overwhelming. Being a good host is a central value in Arab life, and Arabs will literally spend themselves into debt to host you. You will be waited on hand and foot. Accept that, or don’t accept the invitation. There is no middle ground.

- Especially in observant Muslim families, expect strict sex segregation socially. Women will be with the women, men with the men. Women should shake hands with other women, but the men may not take their hand. If perceived as a friend, however, men may be kissed on both cheeks by other men. Male friends may also hold hands. This is not at all indicative of homosexuality; it’s just the way friendship is expressed.
- When being served food or beverages, stay seated, unlike North American or European parties where we mill around. I don’t know what the rule is on women guests offering to help in the kitchen, but it would be *unheard of* for a male guest to do so. Not knowing this, I tried once, and I thought my hosts were going to pass out. It was a major faux pas.
- If you are in an observant Muslim home, remember that Islam proscribes the consumption of alcohol, and you should not expect to be served any. It may embarrass your hosts to ask for an alcoholic drink, as they will want to please a guest. Some Muslims, less observant, may offer you alcohol, or drink themselves. Wait to be offered.
- Arab hosts will serve you more food than you can *possibly* eat. This is not a problem—if you understand how the game is played. When you’ve had enough, leave a good amount of food on the plate. An empty plate in American culture shows appreciation of a wonderful meal, but to an Arab host it means that not enough food was served, and more will be forthcoming. It’s a little like a dog chasing its tail; I gained five pounds and major gastrointestinal distress before I learned this. I’m thinking, “Good Lord, will the food never stop coming?” They’re thinking, “Good Lord, how much do Americans eat?!?” I would guess that family is *still* talking about my appetite.
- Your Arab hosts will *insist* on paying for anything you do while visiting them. Don’t suggest anything expensive. While you can offer to pay, don’t force the issue—*it will not work and will cause great offense*. So don’t suggest doing things that would strain your hosts financially. You could offer a present for your host or, even better, something for their children. American tee-shirts are often popular. For adults, flowers are always safe as a gift. Remember that wine is not an appropriate gift for observant Muslims.
- You will often be asked to stay for at least three days, the traditional minimum for Arab hospitality. If you can’t stay, just keep saying so politely, while saying how much you’d love to. You will likely have to refuse several times. That’s all right. Just be very polite

and grateful while doing so, and thank the person profusely for the wonderful hospitality.

- Rave about how wonderful the food was. They lay it on thick as hosts, and guests are expected to reciprocate. And the food is wonderful, by the way, so that should be easy.
- But do not admire a specific item in the house, or your host may feel impelled to offer it to you. Just say, “you have a lovely home,” and remark on how wonderful your hosts made you feel there. Again, I generally find that true, so saying so comes from the heart.
- Some Arabs, especially Muslims, feel it risks fate if their children are complimented directly for their brilliance, beauty, or accomplishment. This is prideful boasting, and risks the wrath of God upon whom all things depend (or more superstitiously, “the evil eye”). More appropriate: “God has blessed your children with many gifts,” “God has given you a beautiful child,” or “God has been very good to your family.” Still, children are much loved and generally a very safe topic of conversation. Politics and religion are usually not, unless you know a family very well. Listen more than you talk—always.
- If you don’t have any other opportunity to experience Arab hospitality, you may want to contact a remarkable man I met who lives in a village in East Jerusalem on the top of the Mount of Olives. His name is Ibrahim Ahmad Abu El-Hawa. He hosts people for meals and even for lodging with no real charge, though he accepts contributions for his lovely work of bringing people together across national and religious lines to help heal this land. Staying there would be a bit too much like a hostel for me, but a meal with him is quite an experience. If you accept his hospitality, please leave him ₪80 or so for his work. Contact me if you want to meet him, and tell him his friend Douglas sent you. He is truly a lovely man.




## Other Groups in Israel.

In addition to the Jewish-Arab dichotomy, and the Jewish-Muslim-Christian triad, Israel has a host of other, distinct groups that make up the balance of the population. The **Druze** are a sect that grew out of Islam but keep their religious beliefs and traditions secret. They number some 110,000 and speak Arabic, but are a distinct community. The Druze are very loyal to whatever country they live in and serve in the IDF, often with great distinction and prominence. There are two major Druze villages on Mount Carmel (see the Haifa section for more information) and others in Galilee. Druze in the Golan, on the other hand, mostly consider themselves still to be Syrians, though the civil war is straining that identity. The **Bahà'is** are a modern faith founded in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, and their world headquarters are in Haifa with another major shrine in Akko. The Bahà'ì faith teaches that all religious prophets (Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, and Buddha among them) are from God, humankind is one, and women and men are equal. The Bahà'ì gardens and terraces in Haifa are among the most beautiful sites in all Israel (again, see Haifa section). Don't miss them. The **Circassians** are Muslims who are originally from the Caucasus area of southern Russia, and they settled in the area in the mid-1800s after fleeing the aftermath of a failed war against Tsarist Russia. They speak Cherkesi, written in the Cyrillic alphabet, and live mainly in two Galilee communities. The **Bedouin Arabs** are the famed desert nomads of romantic novels and films such as *Lawrence of Arabia*. They comprise nearly 10% of the Arab population and belong to some 30 tribes, most of them scattered over a wide area in the south.



Formerly nomadic shepherds and herders, the Bedouins are currently in transition from a tribal social framework to a permanently settled society and are gradually entering Israel's labor force. This is a controversial policy with decidedly mixed results. You will most notice them in the Negev or in the Judean wilderness on the way from Jerusalem to Masada and the Dead Sea. Many Bedouin serve in the IDF, particularly as trackers, and have a very distinguished record of service. If you tour with Adam Sela in the Negev (see the Negev section) or with Desert Eco Tours out of Eilat, you may have a chance to meet local Bedouin, a fascinating experience.

## MISCELLANEOUS.

- English news is no longer offered on regular Israel Radio (Kol Yisrael) stations, but you can listen on line at [www.iba.org.il/world](http://www.iba.org.il/world). English news from Israeli newspapers can also be found on [www.ynetnews.com](http://www.ynetnews.com), [www.jpost.com](http://www.jpost.com), or [www.timesofisrael.com](http://www.timesofisrael.com), and the latter two have excellent, free mobile phone apps with news updates, very useful for keeping up with security-related issues. Many hotels offer the English-language *Jerusalem Post* newspaper or *Ha'aretz* in English, offered as an insert in the *International New York Times*. All are excellent ways to keep current with the news.
  - If you want to take your laptop or tablet, most hotels have wi-fi service, though sometimes at a charge. Many cafés and restaurants also offer wi-fi service at no charge. You probably won't need a voltage converter other than what came with the device (check to be sure, but most handle 220- as well as 120-volt current), but you will need the three-pronged adapter for Israeli plugs or at least the two-prong European plug.
  - You may find it very convenient to have a cell phone while in the country. If you have an unlocked cell phone that can take an Israeli SIM card, use **Snapir**, who sells the cards at a very reasonable price. Contact him at [snapir@syc.co.il](mailto:snapir@syc.co.il) or at <http://simtoisrael.com>. He mails the card to you with instructions, either to your home or to your first hotel in Israel, if time is tight. His customer service is *extraordinary*! Please tell him I sent you. If you have a locked phone and can't use a SIM card, I have rented phones from **Amigo** several times and find them easy to use and reasonable in price ([www.amigo-us.com](http://www.amigo-us.com)). They mail the phone to you before you leave home with a return envelope to return it when you get home.
- 
- Speaking of telephones, if you are calling Israel from the US, you dial 011-972 and then the numbers I give you in this guide, dropping the zero on the city code. From elsewhere, the country code is 972. Once in Israel, though, you will need to dial the 0 with the city code, and of course leave out the 011-972. For calls to Israel, you may wish to purchase time in \$10 blocks through One Suite at [www.onesuite.com](http://www.onesuite.com); calls are as cheap as 4.5¢ per minute for land lines and 8.5¢ for cells (and can be made to anywhere).
  - Take lots of sunscreen, sunglasses, and a good sun hat. Also, don't forget to drink lots of water on hot days. You're dehydrating more than you think because, particularly in the drier interior, you won't feel sweaty—it evaporates immediately. You will need to force water frequently—if you wait until you feel thirsty, it's too late and you won't catch up. The water in Israel is safe to drink—no need for bottled water.

- Israeli hotels sometimes do not provide washcloths, if you care about that. I buy inexpensive ones in bulk and just leave them as I check out of the hotel.
- North American electrical appliances (other than most laptops) require a converter, which can be purchased there. You'll also need a plug adapter. You can find these on the Internet as well. If visiting from a country that uses 220 volt current, you'll only need the plug adapter, and most European plugs work.

## SUGGESTED ITINERARIES:

### Tel Aviv—The “White City” and The Heart of Modern Israel

**Suggested Time: 3 nights.**



Tel Aviv is Israel’s New York (one of its nicknames is “the Big Orange”) and at first glance can seem like any other big city on the sea. But it is the heart of modern Israel, “the capital of Mediterranean cool,” and I have come to truly treasure it. If New York and Miami Beach had a love child, it would look a lot like Tel Aviv! Also, if you start in Tel Aviv, which I recommend, you will have a couple of days to recover from a long flight and jet lag without feeling like you’re missing the must-see historical sites. A good resource for planning your Tel Aviv trip is an on-line guide, in English, designed for visitors to the city, at [www.telavivguide.net](http://www.telavivguide.net), with information on hotels, restaurants, must-see sites, nightlife, and a host of useful tips. The site also has an interactive map of the city; you click on sites, and are referred immediately to a web page on that particular item of interest. Other good sites include [www.visit-tel-aviv.com](http://www.visit-tel-aviv.com) and [www.telaviv4fun.com](http://www.telaviv4fun.com). **Tel Aviv is also the center of gay and lesbian life in Israel**, and LGBT visitors should check out [www.gaytlvguide.com](http://www.gaytlvguide.com), and for **LGBT information for areas of Israel outside Tel Aviv as well**, see <http://tourism.glb.org.il/en>.

Tel Aviv has many great hotels, but prepare for the fact that Tel Aviv hotels are the most expensive in the country (with lots of business travelers as well as tourists). You can save money by staying in mid-range hotels, not the 5-star places. Again, **work with Regent Tours**; see “Booking Hotels” at p. 9.



I have three, main recommendations for hotels in Tel Aviv. My favorite now is the **Herods Tel Aviv** located at 155 Ha-Yarkon Street, tel. (03) 521-6666; see [www.herods-hotels.com/herods-tel-aviv](http://www.herods-hotels.com/herods-tel-aviv). The guest relations manager is named **Shikma Shechter** and she is very helpful—[shikmash@fattal.co.il](mailto:shikmash@fattal.co.il). It is a large hotel with a classic 1930s Tel Aviv look, offering absolutely outstanding service and very nice guest rooms.

The reviews of late have been more mixed—the place needs some paint and more attention to upkeep. I still like it, though—the location is ideal, an easy walk everywhere, and for me, it is worth the splurge. This hotel is in the more northern part of the city, close to the Old Port area, and it directly overlooks the beach. My favorite in the moderate range is the **Savoy Hotel**, a smaller, boutique-style hotel located more in south-central Tel Aviv and closer to Jaffa at 5 Ge’ula Street, tel. (03) 514-0500,; <http://hotelsavoy.co.il>. This hotel was renovated a few years

back and has a charming, sleek, modern look, with spectacular views off of the balconies. The manager **Rivka** is delightfully helpful, and the whole staff offers great customer service. It is a half-block off the beach, and while the neighborhood is not great, the location is outstanding. Near the Herods Hotel in the north, I also recommend the **Melody Hotel** at 220 Ha-Yarkon Street, tel. (03) 521-5300; see [www.atlas.co.il/melody-hotel-tel-aviv](http://www.atlas.co.il/melody-hotel-tel-aviv). It, too, is a charming, well-run, and stylish boutique hotel in a renovated building that was once the Canadian embassy. The location is great as well, across from Independence Park, a short walk from the beach, and an easy walk to the port area. If street noise is an issue, get a room in the back or a higher floor. The Melody offers snacks and wine from 5:00 to 7:00 p.m., a nice way to meet other guests. Nearby is the **Shalom & Relax Hotel**, another boutique hotel that gets rave review; it's a little pricier. It's at 216 Ha-Yarkon Street, (03) 762-5400; [www.atlas.co.il/shalom-hotel-tel-aviv](http://www.atlas.co.il/shalom-hotel-tel-aviv). Other moderate-range options include the **Cinema Hotel** at 1 Zanemhoff Street, tel. (03) 520-7100, or across the street at the **Center Hotel** at 2 Zanemhoff Street, tel. (03) 629-6181. Both are on Dizengoff Square, in the heart of Tel Aviv, and are renovated Bauhaus-architecture buildings, for which Tel Aviv is world-renowned as "The White City." Noise may be an issue there; ask for back rooms away from the square. I also hear good things about the **Art-Plus Hotel**, **Brown Beach Hotel**, and the **Hotel de la Mer**. Regent Tours works with all these hotels; ask for quotes. Finally, for a more budget option, check out the newly opened **Abraham Hostel**; the one in Jerusalem has received great reviews from travelers for years. See [www.abrahamhostels.com/tel-aviv](http://www.abrahamhostels.com/tel-aviv).

All of these hotels are very close to the beach, and within easy walking distance of a lot of interesting places. On the more expensive side, people also like the **Hilton** (also on Ha-Yarkon, next to Independence Park), or the beachfront **Sheraton**. There is also a **Carlton Hotel** on the sea shore and the **David Intercontinental** and the **Dan Panorama Hotel** closer to Jaffa. But I would still take the **Herods** over any of those. (And I didn't forget the apostrophe, by the way—it is omitted for reasons I cannot fathom. As someone who is a stickler for the proper use of the apostrophe, this drives me a tad crazy.)



Frommer's and other guidebooks offer good suggestions on things to do in Tel Aviv, so I commend those to you. You can also find suggestions on [www.telavivguide.net](http://www.telavivguide.net) or on Trip Advisor. I have some personal recommendations, though:

- **Old Jaffa.** This 5,000-year-old city is now part of the combined municipality of Tel Aviv-Yafo, and looking south from Tel Aviv, you will see the old Arab city jutting into the Mediterranean. Jaffa has many artists' shops, narrow streets, and lots of character. I don't shop much on Israel trips, but Jaffa is a good place for that. In any event, it's a wonderful place to explore. The view of the Tel Aviv skyline from Jaffa is magical, both day and night (see photo on previous page). There are free walking tours of Jaffa by Sandeman's every day at 11:00 a.m.; meet at the Ministry of Information Center at Mazouk and Azar Streets under the arches near the old Clock Tower at the entrance to Jaffa. The tour offers a good overview of the ancient city; while there is no charge, plan to tip the guide at least ₪40-50 per person. See [www.newtelavivtours.com/daily-tours/new-tel-aviv-free-tour.html](http://www.newtelavivtours.com/daily-tours/new-tel-aviv-free-tour.html).
- **Strolling the Streets of Tel Aviv.** One choice is **Dizengoff Street**, once famous as the "main street" of Israel, and after some years of decline it seems to be coming back.

You can also walk down **Ben-Yehuda** and **Allenby Streets** to **Sheinkin Street**, Tel Aviv's yuppie district (not as cool as it once was). You can also wander down to **Ha-Carmel Market**, where you'll really see "street Israel," a great place to watch people and drink in the sights, sounds, and smells of food and spices. The **Nahalat Binyamin** neighborhood offers arts and crafts markets on Tuesdays and Fridays, which is fun to explore (though crafts aren't my thing). I also love walking through that neighborhood and nearby **Neve Tzekek**; these are among Tel Aviv's first neighborhoods, and the restorations have made this a great place to stroll, people watch, and take a drink or coffee. Nearby is **Ha-Tachana**, or **The Station**, the renovation of an old, Ottoman-era train station into shops and restaurants. One of my favorite spots in all Israel is **The Rubin Museum** at 14 Bialik Street, which features the beautiful and evocative paintings of Reuben Rubin, one of Israel's greatest artists, in his charming, former home. Tel. (03) 525-5961. Open Shabbat 11:00-2:00, but closed on Sundays, which is unusual.

- **Sarona.** This is the renovated German Colony district in Tel Aviv, a real success story in historic restoration, and it is sleek and full of trendy, upscale shops. I write more about the German Templers later in this guide, but I found this particular place rather sterile and Disneyesque (not intended as a compliment). But it's much-needed green space in the heart of the city for locals, and if you do go, the Visitor's Center is at 14 Avraham Mendler Street, (054) 498-0252. **Note:** If you want to tour and are not part of a pre-arranged group, you *must* make reservations ahead of time, or you find this Visitors' Center most un hospitable to visitors (part of why I am not a fan of Sarona). While there, get some fine Jem's Beer or the beverage of your choice at **Molly Bloom's Sarona**, an Irish pub at 6 Avraham Mendler Street, (055) 886-0188. While much of Sarona was not particularly friendly to tourists, the staff at this pub was terrifically warm and helpful.
- **Walking Tours of Tel Aviv.** Tel Aviv is a flat and easily walkable city, and one of the best ways to explore it is on foot. I have three recommendations for guides—the first is **Jonathan (Yonatan) Kohn**. He is absolutely outstanding and now ranks with Madeleine Lavine in Jerusalem as one of my two favorite guides in the whole country. I suggest the tour that he showed me—start with Old Jaffa and explore Neve Tzedek, Ha-Tachana, and into the Bauhaus District, and other parts of early and current Tel Aviv, such as the renovated **Ha-Bima Theater** and magnificent, adjoining public square. This gives you the chance to see how this amazing city evolved in just over a hundred years from buildings started on sand dunes by just 66 families in 1909 to the thriving metropolis of today. We ended with a visit to the moving, evocative **Rabin Square**, where Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated in November 1995—and Jonathan was there that night. You can contact Jonathan at (054) 554-3448; e-mail [jonskohn@hotmail.com](mailto:jonskohn@hotmail.com). While Jonathan offers Tel Aviv walking tours, he is also licensed to tour anywhere in the country, including driving tourists. Another guide who tours all over Israel but has a special passion for this "capital of Mediterranean cool" is **David Wexler**, [david@davidsland.com](mailto:david@davidsland.com); [www.davidsland.com](http://www.davidsland.com); cell (054) 330-0941. David knows his stuff and is pleasant to be with as well. **On my most recent visit, we toured with Zahi (pronounced Tsakhi) Shaked**, a native-born Tel Avivi, and we enjoyed that a lot; we toured much the same route as I listed above for Yonatan. You can reach Zahi at (054) 690-5522 or at [zahigo@walla.com](mailto:zahigo@walla.com). He is a terrific guide, who often



makes brief videos of portions of the tour that he posts (with your permission) on YouTube—a lovely memento of your day in Tel Aviv! To see our video, check this out: [https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLk3tL9beKyZAd1ZoA6kdI33AAi1oMO\\_Ns](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLk3tL9beKyZAd1ZoA6kdI33AAi1oMO_Ns).

- At the outset of the section of the guide, I called Tel Aviv “The White City,” and it takes this name from the **Bauhaus and International architecture** style that this city preserves more than any other in the world, leading to its designation as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. This style was popular among German planners and architects who fled to Tel Aviv in the 1930s to escape Nazi persecution, and this was the period when much of the city was built. The design of the buildings and the city itself feels very European, with wide boulevards, horizontal designs, angular and curving lines, and white stucco surfaces, also reminiscent of the Art Deco style in Miami Beach. What were once run down and dowdy neighborhoods have been restored beautifully in places, and you can walk through them and enjoy some amazing buildings. The best streets to see it are Ahad Ha’am and Rothschild Boulevard. The **Bauhaus Center** at 99 Dizengoff Street, (03) 522-0249, [www.bauhaus-center.com](http://www.bauhaus-center.com), offers audio or guided walking tours of the Bauhaus district if you want a more detailed look.



- **Bet Ha-t’fusot**, the Nahum Goldmann Museum of the Diaspora on the campus of Tel Aviv University. If you are interested in Jewish history in the Diaspora (exile), this is a must. It is one of the most interesting museums I have been in, not based on artifacts but on re-creations of Diaspora life throughout the world. The university is in the northern section of the city, either a bus, cab, or car ride from your hotel. Tel. (03) 745-7808; see also [www.bh.org.il](http://www.bh.org.il) for more information and visiting hours. While it is a tad run-down now, it is supposed to be undergoing renovation soon.

- **The Yitzhak Rabin Center.** This museum, which is near the Palmach Museum and not far from Bet Ha-t’fusot, tells the story of the State of Israel and its history through the life and times of Yitzhak Rabin, the Prime Minister who led the effort to reach peace with the Palestinians until his assassination at the hands of a right-wing, Jewish extremist in Tel Aviv in November 1995. That murder seared Israelis, perhaps even more than the Kennedy assassination did Americans, and it no doubt changed the course of history in the region. But the museum does not focus on that terrible crime until the end; it mainly looks at the State’s formation and internal conflicts and divisions through the life of this remarkable man who was at the center of so much of its life. It is a must for those interested in modern Israeli history. **You need reservations to tour the museum**—tel. (03) 745-3358, or e-mail [order1@rabincenter.org.il](mailto:order1@rabincenter.org.il). When I visited this place, I was both fascinated and deeply moved. And the memorial to Rabin’s murder at the end, including excerpts from speeches at his funeral by President Clinton, King Hussein, and Rabin’s granddaughter, left me in tears of loss and gratitude for this great man’s life and work.



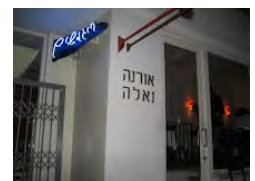
- If you are interested in Zionist history and the birth of the State of Israel, stop in **Ben-Gurion House** at 17 Ben-Gurion Boulevard, tel. (03) 511-1010. This was the home of **David and Paula Ben-Gurion** when he became Israel’s first prime minister. This simple house contains more than 20,000 books in five languages, a testament to the breadth of this man’s mind. Also check out **Independence Hall** at 16 Rothschild Boulevard, tel.

(03) 517-3942; <http://eng.ihl.org.il>. Here, David Ben-Gurion proclaimed the founding of the Jewish State on May 14, 1948 as the armies of five surrounding Arab countries prepared to invade and crush the fledgling nation. Some days the museum closes as early as 2:00 p.m., so plan ahead, and **reservations are now required**, which you can make at [reservations@beitatzmaut.org.il](mailto:reservations@beitatzmaut.org.il). You might get in without a reservation on a walk in basis, but no guarantee. Also near Tel Aviv University, you can visit the **Palmach Museum**, which tells the history of this pre-State militia affiliated with the leftist Labor Zionist movement. **Note:** advance reservations are definitely required here. Tours are in Hebrew, but English-language audio units are provided. Like Bet Ha-t'fusot, this is not a museum of artifacts but of visual and auditory recreations of the experiences of one Palmach unit. While a tad over-the-top at times, I found it a powerful tribute to this force that played such a critical role in the fight for Israel's independence—and suffered an enormous casualty rate. It is located at 10 Lebanon Street, tel. (03) 643-6393. For more, see [www.palmach.org.il](http://www.palmach.org.il); click the icon for English. For a look at that period from the right-wing side of the Israeli ideological divide, you can stop at the **Etzel Museum** on the seaside promenade north of Jaffa, 38 King George Street, (03) 528-4001, or the **Jabotinsky Institute** at the same address; tel. (03) 528-6523; [www.jabotinsky.org](http://www.jabotinsky.org).

- The fitness craze has hit Tel Aviv big-time—your main safety risk in that city is being run over by joggers or bicyclists on the seaside promenade. Want to keep fit while on vacation? Maybe a massage to relax you? Check out **Adir Medina** and his **I'm Workout Studio**, 74 Ha-Yarkon Street in the basement of the Isrotel Tower, tel. (052) 465-7456, e-mail [adirmedina@walla.com](mailto:adirmedina@walla.com), website [www.imstudio.co.il](http://www.imstudio.co.il) (Hebrew only). Adir is a great guy and I like that he is a small business owner with his own gym and personal training place—not the big commercial gyms or spas at the hotels. You can work out there, have some personal training, and/or get a great, deep tissue massage. Note, however, that Adir speaks almost no English.
- **Apollonia National Park**, not far north of Tel Aviv and its very upscale neighboring city Herzliya. After all my visits, I just discovered this place in March 2015, and it's stunning. While the site has been populated and fortified off and on since Phoenician days the Crusader fortifications from 1101-1265 are the center of the national park today. The physical setting, with the remarkable ruins perched atop the cliffs overlooking the Mediterranean, is well worth a visit even irrespective of the sites impressive history. There are now accessible paths for people with mobility limitations, a relatively new development at antiquity sites, and Apollonia is a tad off the beaten path, not usually swarmed by tour buses. This is one of the parks that does not sell the multi-park passes, however, even though it's on the card; see pp. 29-30 for an explanation of this problem.



Tel Aviv is full of wonderful restaurants. Every request for recommendations for restaurants sets off a major debate among residents and lovers of Tel Aviv on the Trip Advisor forum, and I usually end up with a list of more than 20 options! You will eat well here. My top choice in Tel Aviv is **Orna v'Ella (Orna and Ella)**, named after its two women owners. This charming restaurant is at 33 Sheinkin Street, tel. (03) 525-2805; see [www.ornaandella.com](http://www.ornaandella.com). It serves comfort food, well and creatively prepared. Be sure to try the yam pancakes! I recently discovered the **London Resto-Café**, a charming, popular spot on the beach at 111 Herbert Samuel Promenade, in the back of the Sheraton Hotel, tel. (03) 523-5055, e-mail



[London k@zahav.net.il](mailto:k@zahav.net.il). It offers excellent meat, fish, and seafood dishes, good cocktails, and is very well known for scrumptious desserts. Ask for **Lara** as your server if she is still there—she is terrific! Another fun place along the seaside promenade is **Café Metzada** at 83 Ha-Yarkon Street, (03) 510-3353, next to a McDonald's. I found it a perfect place to eat for a first night in the city, with many tasty light dishes in a very attractively designed place.

For a really lovely, upscale dinner, I recommend a very fine, kosher restaurant called **Olive Leaf** in the sea-side Sheraton. It has a great view of the Mediterranean Sea as well, and is located at 115 Ha-Yarkon Street, (03) 521-9300. The view as the Sun sets into the Mediterranean is very romantic! Another fantastic, upscale choice is **Rafael** at 87 Ha-Yarkon Street in the King David Tower just south of the Dan Tel Aviv; from Ha-Yarkon, you enter through a hotel lobby and go down stairs. Tel. (03) 522-6464; e-mail [info@raphael-restaurant.net](mailto:info@raphael-restaurant.net), website [www.raphaeltlv.co.il](http://www.raphaeltlv.co.il). It's an upscale place, pricy and non-kosher, with both fish and meat dishes prepared with a Moroccan flair, and it's become my favorite Tel Aviv restaurant.

For lunch or dinner, **GooCha** is a reasonably priced seafood restaurant at the corner of Dizengoff and Ben-Gurion, not far from Rabin Square, tel. (03) 522-2886. GooCha also opened a second location at 14 Ibn Gvirol, tel. (03) 691-1603. Toward Jaffa, check out **Manta Ray** on the seaside promenade, tel. (03) 517-4773. It offers great food (you can order tapas-style dishes to sample several items) with a spectacular view of the sea and the city, and the service is excellent! In good weather, the beautiful patio area is open to the sea. Make reservations—this is a popular place, and Brett really loved it for our first meal in the city on our recent trip. While touring the Bauhaus area with Jonathan Kohn, we stopped for lunch at a cute place called the **Espresso Bar Rothschild**, at 8 Rothschild Avenue, (03) 510-8918. We liked it a lot—great salads and sandwiches, and of course coffee!

You might also check out the renovated **Old Port** area north of the Hilton Hotel and Independence Park on Ha-Yarkon. This area, opened early in the 2000s, features many restaurants, clubs, and shops. For an earthy, everyday-Israeli fish restaurant, check out **Benny the Fisherman (Beni ha-Dayag)**; tel. (03) 544-0518. This place has a great, informal atmosphere and is a particularly great place to watch Tel Aviv life go by. Another nice place is **Yulia's**, tel. (03) 546-9777. We just had dessert there, but it was heavenly, and the dinner menu looked great as well.

**In Jaffa**, a great place is **Haj Kahil**, an Arabic/Middle Eastern restaurant at 18 Raziel on the Clock Tower Square at the entrance to Jaffa, tel. (057) 942-8347; [www.hajkahil.rest-e.co.il](http://www.hajkahil.rest-e.co.il). The lamb shoulder with rice dish was one of the best I have ever enjoyed in Israel, and with great service! This place is Arab-owned and not kosher. I can also recommend the **Abu Nasser-Hinnawi** meat and seafood restaurant at 130 Kedem Street in south Jaffa near the Peres Peace Center; tel. (03) 507-5539 or (03) 506-7132. It is owned by an old and prominent Christian Arab family and also serves wonderful dishes with a Middle-Eastern flavor. The fish was to die for, and the meat dishes are delicious as well. Also not kosher, however. If you want to experience some classic and absolutely delicious Libyan-Jewish food, try **Dr. Shakshuka**, a kosher restaurant at 3 Bet Eshel, Jaffa, tel. (03) 513-6560, <http://drshaksuka.rest-e.co.il>. Bring your appetite, and be sure to try the shakshuka, a signature North African dish featuring eggs cooked in a tomato sauce—yum! This is one of my favorite, Israeli classics. On our last trip, we ate at

**Café Noir** at 43 Ahad Ha'am Street, tel. (03) 566-3018. It was a good restaurant, off the beaten path for tourists at least, and as far as I could tell, we were the only non-Israelis in the place. We had great fish dishes. For lunch, I have eaten at a lovely, family-style restaurant called **Pu'ah**, 8 Rabbi Yohanan Street, tel. (03) 681-1140. It is a small place with character, great, outdoor seating, and very good food. Another, great lunch stop is **Abulafia**, 4 Yeffet Street, tel. (052) 238-4306—great hummus, falafel, shwarma, and similar delights from the Middle East.

Not to be outdone by that young, upstart Tel Aviv, Jaffa has now renovated its old port area, and the Jaffa Port is now one of the trendy, up-and-coming areas of this always evolving metropolis. There are great seafood restaurants such as **The Old Man and the Sea (Ha-Zaken v'ha-Yam)**, tel. (053) 809-4346, [hazaken1970@gmail.com](mailto:hazaken1970@gmail.com). This place is open every day, including Shabbat—obviously not kosher. There are other, fun places in this complex—the restaurant and bar scene in Tel Aviv is booming and constantly in flux!

## Haifa—The City by the Bay

**Suggested Time: 2 to 3 nights.**

While Haifa on the northern Mediterranean coast is not as much of a tourist center as Jerusalem or Tel Aviv, it remains my favorite city in the world. Many tourists skip it, which is a big mistake. Its beautiful bay reminds many of San Francisco or Naples. And it is a warm, vibrant city with the most successful Jewish-Arab coexistence of any major city in Israel. I absolutely adore Haifa—if I lived in Israel, this would be my home.



After years of searching for a good hotel in Haifa, my favorite by far is the **Crowne Plaza Haifa**, at 111 Yefe Nof Street, tel. (04) 835-0835, fax (04) 835-0836; [www.afi-hotels.com/Crowne Plaza Haifa](http://www.afi-hotels.com/Crowne_Plaza_Haifa); e-mail [hi\\_gamsec@crownplaza-il.com](mailto:hi_gamsec@crownplaza-il.com). This outstanding hotel hangs on the edge of Yefe Nof (Panorama) Street atop Mount Carmel with a stunning view of the city and Haifa Bay below (see picture above). It is not an inexpensive place, but it is very much worth it—big, beautiful rooms, many with a bay view, and absolutely outstanding service! If you have any questions or issues, seek out customer service manager **Natalie Kaplan**, one of the best hotel managers I have met in Israel. Other options include the nearby **Dan Panorama Haifa Hotel**, 107 Ha-Nassi Avenue, tel. (04) 835-2222, e-mail [panoramahaifa@danhotels.com](mailto:panoramahaifa@danhotels.com). This hotel offers the same spectacular views (get a bay room), and a great staff and breakfast. But the room décor is quite dated and needs an upgrade, and it just does not compare with the Crowne Plaza (though it does have a spectacular outdoor pool, which the Crowne Plaza lacks). Also nearby is the **Dan Carmel**, another large, upscale hotel. There are also some less expensive guesthouse options, but for the combination of view, updated rooms and facilities, and service, at this point, the Crowne Plaza cannot be beat.



If you stay in this area of Central Carmel, I suggest you buy some fine Israeli wines at a terrific wine shop called **Special Reserve** at 109 Ha-Nassi Avenue in the Panorama Center, a mall located under the Dan Panorama Hotel; tel. (04) 836-1187, e-mail [suidan@netvision.net.il](mailto:suidan@netvision.net.il). A second location has opened in the Ahuza district at 14



Horev Street, tel. (04) 625-5818. Note that Israeli wines are no longer the sugary sweet types that people associate with Passover Seders; they have really come into their own, and these fine wines have won many awards in European wine festivals in recent years. **The shop owner is André Suidan**, and either he or his assistant **Moshe** (who runs the Horev Street location) can work with you to find a good bottle in your price range. **Ask for André if he is there; he is a truly lovely man who has become a good friend**, and he will show you the wonders of some fine, reasonably priced Israeli wines. Just meeting André is worth a stop. **Tell André or Moshe that I sent you**, and you might get a taste or two to help you choose. Choose some to sip while enjoying that view from your hotel balcony. Or do as I have done on trips, and just buy a case to cover your needs for the rest of the trip! You can even ship a case home—I do on every trip now. As Israelis say when offering a toast, “*l’chaim!*”—“To life!”

I also have a recommendation for a terrific taxi driver in Haifa—**Robert Halepidis**, who is also studying to be a tour guide. Tel. (054) 546-6811; e-mail [roberthalepidis@hotmail.com](mailto:roberthalepidis@hotmail.com).



### Day trips from and within Haifa:

- **Caesarea** is the seaside city that King Herod built to honor his Roman patron Caesar Augustus, and it was later held by a succession of Byzantines, Arabs, Crusaders, Mamelukes, and Ottoman Turks—and now, the Israelis. These are among the most spectacular ruins in all Israel. The city is also prominent in the New Testament—here Pontius Pilate had his seat of government, the Apostle Paul was tried, and Peter baptized the Roman centurion Cornelius after his vision of God showing him “a new thing.” Jews remember that here began the Great Revolt against Rome in 66-73 C.E. leading to the execution of thousands of Jewish rebels, and Rabbi Akiva was brought here to be flayed alive during the Second (Bar Kochba) Revolt in 132-35 C.E.<sup>1</sup> Lots of history! Be sure to



see the Roman Aqueduct north of the park (pictured at left). Caesarea makes an easy stop on the way from Tel Aviv to Haifa. While you’re in Caesarea, also check out the gorgeous **Old City Caesarea Gallery** with its beautiful paintings and sculptures. Tel. (04) 626-0198; [www.caesareaart.com](http://www.caesareaart.com). Particularly if you buy anything (and we’ve bought both a painting and a sculpture), tell the owner/sculptor Leon Bronstein that I sent you. He is incredibly talented, and a really sweet man. I particularly recommend the works by Bulgarian-Israeli artist Asia Katz. One of her works graces our dining room, to many positive comments. By the way, since this may be the first national park you visit, you may want to buy an all-park pass, called “the Green Card,” which is both convenient and reasonably priced at ₪150 (about \$39 USD). You can also buy a six-park pass for ₪110 (\$28 USD), but generally the all-park pass is the better deal. You don’t have to keep track, and you’ll likely see more than enough parks to save money. Note: for some inexplicable reason, some of the smaller parks don’t sell them—which makes no sense at all since they are on the card! If you visit one of those first, keep your receipt—you may get a credit when you do buy the pass at a later park, but that didn’t work for me on my most recent visit. Such a stupid policy!

---

<sup>1</sup>The terms “Common Era” and “Before Common Era” are preferred by Israelis and most scholars because of the obvious Christian connotations of “A.D.” and “B.C.” So you’ll generally see “C.E.” and “B.C.E.” instead, including in this guide.



- **Akko**—Easily accessible by car, bus, or train from Haifa, Akko offers scenes from “The Arabian Nights.” The Old City is absolutely magical. Akko (or Acre) was the Crusaders’ last stronghold in the Holy Land, and the Crusader “underground city” with its incredibly well-preserved knights’ halls (pictured at right) is one of the most amazing sites in all Israel. **Uri Buri** and **Abu Christo** are famous restaurants in the city. It is a wonderful and colorful city to explore on foot, though it is a bit like a rabbit warren (so a guide might be helpful here). Also, just outside Akko is **Bahji**, the resting place of Bahá’u’lláh, the founder and greatest prophet of the Bahá’í faith, who was imprisoned by the Ottoman Turks as an apostate from Islam. His burial place is a peaceful and quiet shrine, surrounded by extraordinary gardens.



- **Rosh Ha-Niqra**. On the northern border with Lebanon, these sea-caves carved into chalk cliffs are truly spectacular. They are only accessible by cable car (unless you swim there!). On the way to Rosh Ha-Niqra, you will pass by the beach resort of **Nahariya**, with the good **Singapore Chinese Restaurant**, tel. (04) 992-4952. But that city has overall seen better days.
- **Zikhron Ya’akov** is a lovely and charming city on the slopes of Mount Carmel south of Haifa, glistening on the hills above the coastal highway. Like Caesarea, this is a possible stop on the way from Tel Aviv. Zikhron, as it is commonly known for short, was one of the first Zionist settlements in the Land of Israel in the First Aliyah, financed largely by the Rothschild fortune, and the name (“Memory of Jacob”) recalls the founding baron’s father Jacob. Each major wave of Jewish immigration to the Land of Israel in modern times is called an “aliyah,” and the First Aliyah in the 1880s and 1890s was the only one of the five aliyot that was religious in nature. But unlike the Jewish population already in the Land of Israel (and always there), they were also Zionist in motivation, committed to doing more than praying, studying, and dying in the Holy Land, and they insisted on being self-sufficient rather than relying on charity from overseas to finance their lives. See the **First Aliyah Museum** for more on that story, tel. (04) 629-4777. Start at the **Sarah Aharonson House**, the home of an early Zionist hero who, after seeing the results of the Armenian genocide, was determined to help the British in their campaign against the Ottoman Turks in World War I. She and others formed a spy ring in the town called Nili, which provided information to the British. The Turks intercepted one of her carrier pigeons and tortured her, but she managed to kill herself with a pistol concealed under a tile in a bathroom. It is quite the story.



I noticed right away that several buildings looked much like the German Templar homes in Saron and in Haifa, and my tour guide **Russell Abel** (contact info p. 7) complimented my eye for detail—they were in fact built by Templars who were hired to construct buildings in the new settlement, including the first synagogue. Zikhron today is really a charming place, with beautiful neighborhoods and a central pedestrian district of shops, cafés, and galleries without the sterility of Saron. On a future visit, I think I may stay at a guesthouse for a few days for a different experience.

Back in Haifa itself, we have several sites of interest:

- **The Clandestine Immigration Museum** in Haifa on the seashore level, 204 Allenby Road, tel. (04) 853-6249, tells the story of the movement for “illegal” immigration of Jews to Palestine through a British blockade before and after World War II. Haifa played a key role in that struggle, and it’s one of Israel’s great stories. You can also walk from there to **Elijah’s Cave**, the traditional site of his confrontation with the prophets of Ba’al, a site revered by Jews, particularly Sephardim.
- Also, don’t miss the spectacular **Bahà’i Shrine and Gardens**. Haifa is the world center of the Bahà’i faith, a peaceful, gentle faith that teaches that the prophets of all faiths, including Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, and Buddha, were sent by God. The gardens are on nineteen terraces that reach from the port level all the way to Yefe Nof, the street along the top of Mount Carmel near where most of the hotels are located. To see the gardens fully, you need to go on a tour offered by the Bahà’i authorities; self-touring is limited to certain areas. For more information and schedules of tours, see [www.ganbahai.org.il/en/guided-tours](http://www.ganbahai.org.il/en/guided-tours). But if time is limited, you can get a good sense of the breathtakingly beautiful gardens from the overlook on Yefe Nof Street, at the top of the gardens. Also, make sure to see what the gardens look like from below at night; it is one of the loveliest things I have ever seen! You can get great views from the German Colony area along Ben-Gurion Boulevard.
- **Hiking in Carmel National Park**. If you are interested in some exercise and nature, you can drive or take a bus to the University of Haifa, with stunning views from the top of Mount Carmel. From there, you can hike into the large Mount Carmel National Park on the far side of the mountain, with trails through beautiful mountain pine forests. There is also a wildlife park there called Hai Bar Carmel, where the Israel Nature and Parks Authority seeks to reintroduce into the wild the animals of biblical Israel—Persian fallow deer, wild sheep, gazelles, oryx, wild asses, and Griffon vultures.



Eating out in Haifa is a far more diverse, fun scene than was once the case for this largely industrial and working class city. On a recent trip, I found a great new places in the Central Carmel district, courtesy of André Suidan’s suggestion. Check out **Voilà**, which features delicious Swiss-French cuisine, located in Central Carmel at 119 Ha-Nasi Boulevard, tel. (04) 837-0737, [www.rest.co.il/voila](http://www.rest.co.il/voila). **Jacko’s** is a great fish and seafood restaurant at down in the port area at 12 Kehilat Saloniki Street, tel. (053) 809-4661; they also have branches in Tel Aviv, Netanya, and Herzliya. This is one of Israel’s most famous seafood restaurants—nothing fancy, but very good seafood. I’ve also enjoyed a Chinese restaurant called **Tokai**, or **Sea Waves** in Hebrew, at 108 Yefe Nof, (04) 838-3025. But our new favorite from our most recent trip was **Elkheir**, a Druze restaurant at 139 Ha-Nassi Boulevard, tel. (04) 850-0090; e-mail [elkheircarmel@gmail.com](mailto:elkheircarmel@gmail.com). The place is nothing fancy, but the famous Druze hospitality and fantastic food are on full display! We ate enough for a week. . . .

Venturing out a bit, check out the gorgeous and interesting **German Colony** on Ben-Gurion Boulevard on the port-level, a fun area of restaurants and night life. You can take the Carmelit subway from the top station in Central Carmel all the way to the last station; from there, it is about a 10-minute walk to the German Colony. You can also take a bus from the Carmel Center

area in front of the Dan Panorama directly to Ben-Gurion Boulevard; check with your hotel. Or it's an easy cab ride. In the German Colony, I recommend **Douzan** with its colorful and delightful owner, **Fadi Najjar**. Douzan is at 35 Ben-Gurion Boulevard, tel. (04) 852-5444, [www.douzan.com](http://www.douzan.com), and it has a wide-ranging, eclectic menu. In nice weather, take an outside table with that spectacular night view of the Bahà'i Gardens up the side of Mount Carmel—breathtaking!—but interior tables are also available. Fadi is a unique Haifa experience, hovering over the proceedings with careful attention and great affection as he kisses the cheeks of women, men, IDF soldiers, American sailors; it doesn't matter. Whether or not you get smooched, tell Fadi “shalom” from me, please! His English is limited, so you may have to have a friend or staff member translate. Or just say “Douglas” and wave my guidebook at him! For inexpensive but very good Middle Eastern food, you can try **Abu Yusuf** near the Ford garage in downtown Haifa, the port area. It's very informal and in a dead neighborhood at night, but offers plentiful and tasty food at a very reasonable price. It's near the Paris Square Carmelit stop, tel. (04) 866-3723.



Finally, as you travel from Haifa to either Tiberias or Tsfat, I have several stops to recommend. You could also do these as day trips from Haifa as well.

- **Nazareth.** This is, of course, the city where Jesus grew up, and as such, is important to many Christians. There are a number of major sites there, and the most spectacular is the Church of the Annunciation, a modern Catholic church in the center of the city. Its dome is the dominant feature of the Nazareth skyline. Don't miss the mosaics in the church depicting the Madonna and child, each donated by the Catholics of that nation. My favorite is Japan's, which incorporates pearls into the design! Other sites include the Greek Orthodox Church of the Annunciation, which also contains “Mary's Well,” an ancient spring which probably did once serve Jesus' family in what was then a tiny, backwater hamlet with a population of no more than 500. Some visitors love “Nazareth Village,” which seeks to re-create Nazareth life in the First Century C.E. It is a bit “Disneyish” for me, but many enjoy it.
- **The Druze Villages, Daliat al-Carmel and Isfiya.** South of Haifa along Route 672, you can visit two major Druze villages on the southern approach to Mount Carmel, a chance for a wonderful taste of this important Israeli ethnic/religious group. The Druze are renowned for their hospitality, fine food, and wonderful fabrics and crafts, and these towns are often mobbed by Israeli bargain-hunters, especially on Shabbat. In Daliat al-Carmel (the more southern town), stop for lunch at **Halabi's Restaurant**. Just ask anyone for “**Fuad Halabi's restaurant**”; you'll find it. This meal was *wonderful*—very inexpensive, delicious food with a mezze that will fill you for what feels like days. They offer the best falafel I have ever tasted! It's just off the main road, tel. (04) 839-3576 or (052) 477-6048. Fuad is a lively, gregarious man who loves to host his guests.



And if you come back to Haifa over the crest of Mount Carmel, the view of the city, the bay, and the Valley of Jezreel will take your breath away. As one friend who traveled with me said, “that alone was worth the price of admission.”

- **Zippori National Park.** Just a few kilometers outside of Nazareth stood the major First Century city of Zippori, or Sephoris in Greek. Sephoris was the big city in Jesus' day, and since it was constructed during his lifetime, it is virtually certain that he and

Joseph, who were carpenters or day laborers, would have worked here. There was also a major Jewish revolt in Sephoris during his youth, which was brutally crushed by the Romans. It is interesting to speculate on what effect that had on his views of the ruling class and how the Roman occupation exploited and crushed the poor. But the city struck a truce with the Romans in the Great Revolt of 66-70 C.E. and thus survived. The ruins contain some of the most spectacular mosaics in all of Israel, including the famed “Mona Lisa of the Galilee” (left). It is an amazing site.



- **Bet She'arim.** This national park southeast of Haifa contains the tombs of prominent rabbis from the Talmudic period, not really my period of interest, but these tombs are absolutely *spectacular*. After the fall of Jerusalem, the center of Jewish life moved north to the Galilee, and the Sanhedrin (supreme Jewish council) was based here for years. Take a tour if you can—the tombs are not easy to explore or understand on your own. English tours are not scheduled, but call (04) 983-1643 a day in advance and they may be able to find an English-speaking guide (or bring your own).

- **Bar'am.** The ancient synagogue at Bar'am, almost on the Lebanese border, dates from the Fourth Century, and it is one of the best preserved in Israel. Now a national park, the ruins are very interesting, and it is a quiet, lovely place, often missed by the tour buses. There is also a modern and quite distressing story here. During the 1948 War for Independence, the new Israel Defense Forces (IDF) evacuated the Maronite Christian villagers from the nearby town of Birin, on the Lebanese border. The villagers had sat out the war, and the IDF promised them that they could return in a few days. IDF officials apparently feared that the villagers would link up with nearby Maronite-dominated Lebanon, which had invaded the new State. Nearly seven decades later, the villagers have never been permitted to return, despite staying out of the war—and the broken promises of several Israeli prime ministers. The villagers continue to try to keep the village maintained and its memory alive, and weddings of descendants are even held in its small church. You can walk through the ruins and feel the unjust story of people caught in the middle—who should at long last be allowed to come home.



As a note, restaurants near gas stations in Israel often offer far better food than we find in North America, and an excellent example is the **Horan** restaurant next to the Sonol gas station on Route 89 in the **Druze village of Hurfeish** not far from Bar'am. Tel. (050) 587-6878, (04) 957-0352. Owner **Mahmoud Zidane** runs an excellent little place with outstanding food and Druze hospitality—well worth a stop!



## Tsfat (Safed)—The Mystical City.

**Suggested Time: One night, optional.**

This stop is optional, depending on time. The city is frankly a little run down, and if you stay here, there are three possible reasons. First, Tsfat (or as it is usually called in English, “Safed”) is the birthplace and heart of Jewish mysticism, called “Kabbalah,” and if that is something that interests you, there is nowhere better to experience it than here. Tsfat is one of Judaism’s four holy cities, and its spiritual atmosphere is palpable. Second, even outside of that specific, religious connection, Tsfat is also one of Israel’s artistic centers with a very extensive Artists’ Quarter in the old Arab section. Finally, Tsfat, perched high in the mountains of the Upper Galilee, is significantly cooler in the summer, and as such is a major holiday destination for Israelis trying to escape the sometimes brutal summer heat.



In Tsfat, I recommend you stay at the remarkable **Ruth Rimonim Inn**, a lovely 300-year old renovated Turkish khan (inn) that is very romantic. It is located in the Artists’ Colony, P.O. Box 1011, Safed 13110 Israel, tel. (04) 699-4666. If you do stay there, get a room in the older section, which is more romantic. My husband and I loved Room 9. (The newer rooms are fine; they just don’t have the same charm and character.) The region is beautiful, hilly and high, and as noted, is quite a bit cooler in both the summer and winter. While an advantage in the summer, it may be quite a bit less pleasant in the winter.



As I mentioned, Tsfat is significant as the center of Jewish mysticism, and I highly recommend a tour guide named **Aryeh Buznakh**, who offers walking tours of “mystical Tsfat.” While I’m not one to overly rely on tour guides, Tsfat is difficult to access on your own, with many of the synagogues and other sites hidden away in the warrens of this ancient city. You can reach Aryeh at (054) 638-3309 or at [lilach188@gmail.com](mailto:lilach188@gmail.com). I used him several years ago, and our time with him was very memorable. People I have referred to him since have all been pleased.



In the section on Caesarea, I mentioned the artwork of **Asia Katz**. Her gallery in Tsfat (she lives in the town) can be found at **7 Lebanon Street in the Artists’ Colony, (04) 692-2373 or (052) 433-8862**. Taste is personal, but you can see her work; the piece to the left is very similar to the one we purchased in 1997. Her studio is also in the city.



Tsfat is not much of a restaurant town. Many people staying at the Rimonim take their meals at the hotel, and that is an option. There are some places to eat there, but if you want to experience one of the most enjoyable meals I have had in Israel a short drive away, in the city of Rosh Pina, try **Auberge Shulamit**, or as it is known in Hebrew, **Ahuza Shulamit**. It’s about a 15-minute drive from Tsfat, and not much further from Tiberias. You can reach them at (04) 693-1485, see also [www.shulamit.co.il](http://www.shulamit.co.il). They also have a small guesthouse with four rooms, and while I have not stayed there, the charm of the place is as infectious as the food is delicious! It was here that my husband and I first fell in love with good Israeli wine nearly two decades ago. It’s one of my favorite Israeli restaurants, and several of my friends have ranked it near the top of their lists as well. It is not kosher, however.



## Tiberias—The Gateway to the Kinneret and Galilee Region

### Suggested Time: Two Nights.

The prime reason you may want to stay in or near Tiberias is because of the spectacular view of the lovely Lake Kinneret (the biblical Sea of Galilee), and its proximity to numerous historical sites of great interest to both Jews and Christians. For Christians, this is the area that they will likely feel closest to the life of Jesus of Nazareth, for it was here that he spent all but the last week of his public ministry. For Jews, the Talmud says, “God made the seven seas, but the Kinneret is his jewel.” The town itself is actually a tad run down and unremarkable. But as a base to explore the Kinneret region, it is ideally situated.



Wherever you stay, I recommend that you spend a day circumnavigating the Lake by car using this booklet and Frommer’s or Fodor’s as your guide. The directions here presuppose that you are setting out north from Tiberias, but you can adapt from wherever you stay, and the order is not particularly important. At the outset, don’t miss the exhibit of a 2,000-year-old fishing boat recovered from the shores of Lake Kinneret during a drought in 1986, which only went on display in late 1999. Because the boat is roughly contemporaneous with Jesus of Nazareth, it is the subject of much speculation and interest. It’s on display at **Kibbutz Nof Ginosar**, and the video showing the process of recovering and preserving the boat is fascinating.



As you proceed north and east along the lake, key stops may include **the Magdala Center**, where archeologists under Roman Catholic supervision are now excavating the important First Century C.E. Jewish town that gave Mary Magdalene her name (see [www.magdalacenter.com](http://www.magdalacenter.com) for more information); **Tabgha**, with the **Church of the Multiplication of Loaves and Fishes** and the **Church of the Primacy of St. Peter**; and **Capernaum** with its amazing **White Synagogue** from the Fourth Century as well as what are believed to be the remains of Peter’s home and the First Century synagogue in which Jesus preached. Going up the nearby hill, you will see **Korazim** and its ancient synagogue from the Fourth Century C.E. and the **Mount of Beatitudes** with its modern but simple and lovely **Church of the Beatitudes**, which commemorates this traditional site of the Sermon on the Mount. Around the east side of Lake Kinneret, you will find **Kursi** with a Byzantine church from the Fifth and Sixth Centuries commemorating the “miracle of the swine”; and **Ein Gev** on the east side of the lake at the base of the Golan Heights, a kibbutz famous throughout the country for its summer concerts and excellent lakeside fish restaurant. At the southern end of Lake Kinneret, you will cross the **Jordan River** as it exits the lake on its path to the Dead Sea—and you’ll see there is nothing “mighty” about it. While dams actually retain some water here, for most of its length, it’s barely a creek, in part because of the water demands of this thirsty country. There is a baptismal site for Christian pilgrims at **Yardenit**. Just before you re-enter Tiberias, don’t miss the ruins of the **Severus Synagogue** from the Fifth and Sixth Centuries at **Hammat Tiberias**; the mosaics are amazing. You can do all this in a day, though it will be a long one.



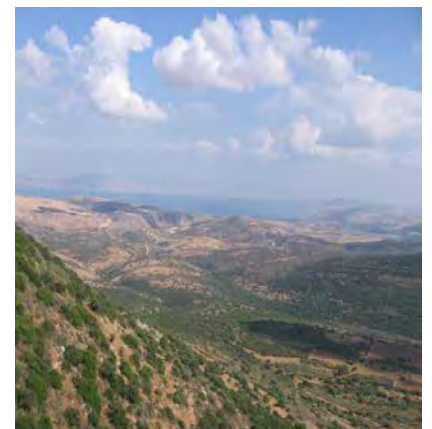


In Tiberias itself, if you are looking for an upscale splurge, I recommend the **Scots Hotel**, which is situated downtown on Lake Kinneret, tel. (04) 671-0710, [www.scotshotels.co.il](http://www.scotshotels.co.il). The hotel is owned by the Church of Scotland (the Presbyterian Church in the United States), and in the early 2000s, the church renovated and greatly expanded what was a hospital and pilgrim's hospice dating back to the 1880s. Some rooms incorporate sections from the original buildings, and there are new towers as well. The breakfasts are fantastic, and the pool is sparkling clean and overlooks the lake. Unfortunately, prices have skyrocketed since it opened, so while it may be worth a splurge, be forewarned of sticker shock. Also, note that the Scots Hotel is not kosher. Another, much less expensive option is **Kibbutz Nof Ginosar**, just north of the city. Tel. (04) 670-0320, fax (04) 679-2170, web site at [www.ginosar.co.il/en](http://www.ginosar.co.il/en). This is the place with the 2,000-year-old boat. The kibbutz has both a hotel and a set of small cottages called Ginosar Village. Rooms are priced reasonably, and it is located right on Lake Kinneret just a few kilometers north of Tiberias. In 2015, I stayed in one of the cottages in Ginosar Village; it was basic but charming and quiet. But this place is hugely popular with the big bus tours and a bit overfull of American tour groups for my taste—I love my fellow Americans, but I don't go to Israel to hang out with them. Visitors and experts on the Trip Advisor forum also speak highly of **Ma'agan Holiday Village** on the southern side of Lake Kinneret, and a so-called “dude ranch” called **Vered Ha-Galil**, complete with horseback riding, is located on the north side of the Kinneret. That may be my next place to try. There are also more upscale (and kosher) hotel options in Tiberias itself if you're so inclined, and Regent Tours can set you up.



On the eastern side of the Lake, at the base of the Golan Heights, I recommend the **Ramot Resort** ([www.ramotresort.com](http://www.ramotresort.com)). While this side of the Lake is a bit more remote, the Ramot Resort is a gorgeous facility with spectacular views of the Lake from nearly every room. Sunsets over the Galilee hills are stunning! Ramot offers both hotel rooms and private cabins. I stayed there a few years ago and liked it a lot—though navigating the hordes of Israeli families at meals can be a not-so-pleasant experience. This is a kosher place, run by the nearby moshav of Ramot. (A moshav is a communal settlement like a kibbutz, but property is privately owned.) Another and perhaps better choice within the moshav itself is a small guesthouse that an Israel friend recommends, called **The Best View There Is (Ha-Khi Nof Sh'Yesh)**, tel. (04) 673-1113; [www.dodo4u.net/EN/](http://www.dodo4u.net/EN/). Another option on the eastern side of the Lake is the **Ein Gev Holiday Resort** ([www.eingev.com](http://www.eingev.com)), run by the Kibbutz Ein Gev.

You can have a different experience by staying in a guesthouse, which Israelis call a “zimmer” (from the German/Yiddish word for “room”; the “z” is pronounced “ts”). These are akin to what North Americans would call a “bed-and-breakfast,” though breakfast may incur an additional charge; you need to check. The moshav **Amirim** has many zimmers available. I stayed at **Nof 10 (“View 10”)** in May 2008, and the view of the entire Kinneret region from the cabin and its balcony, shown below at right, was simply unbelievable. It is one of the most beautiful places I have ever stayed. This was a definite splurge at ₪1,100 a night for a cabin (₪800 a night on weekdays), but it was very much worth it. Just look at that view of the Kinneret, the Golan, and the entire region—all visible while soaking in a Jacuzzi! See [www.nof10.com/View-10-Amirim.htm](http://www.nof10.com/View-10-Amirim.htm) for more



information, and note that you must book the cabin by telephone and may have to pay by cash in shekels; the owners, just a small family operation, may not take checks or credit cards from abroad. Prices may vary. You can contact Eran, the owner, at (04) 698-0927 or (052) 236-1011. He lives in another building on the site just up the hill. If you stay there, please give him my best. Note also that these cabins are for adults only, but Amirim is full of zimmerim designed for families with kids as well. **The entire Amirim community is vegetarian** (residents of the moshav have to commit to that). Some visitors will find that appealing, but all visitors are expected to respect and abide by that during their stay.



Tiberias has two excellent Chinese restaurants on the shore of Lake Kinneret—**Ha-Bayit (The House)** and **the Pagoda**, which are jointly owned. Tel. (04) 672-5513; [pagoda@lido-galilee.com](mailto:pagoda@lido-galilee.com). The restaurants share the same menu, but The House is not kosher-certified because it is open only on Erev Shabbat (Friday night) and during the day on Shabbat. (No restaurant that is open on Shabbat can receive a kosher certificate, no matter what type of food is served there.) The food itself *is* “kosher,” though, since it has the same menu as its kosher sister restaurant. You need to reserve ahead for the House; as one of the few places open on Friday evening, it fills up fast. Another great restaurant nearby is **Decks** (kosher), and it is built out over the lake, though it was closed for renovations in March 2015 and was operating out of the Pagoda space. If open, the view of the lake and the town is incredibly romantic, and the food (mainly grilled meats and fish) is great as well. The telephone number is (04) 672-1538. A little south of Tiberias is a fabulous new, upscale place, **the Magdalena Restaurant** in the Magdala Center, one of the best restaurants I have found in northern Israel. Tel. (04) 673-0064, [www.MagdalenaRest.com](http://www.MagdalenaRest.com), e-mail [magdalena@gmail.com](mailto:magdalenagmail.com). Finally, you could easily visit **Auberge Shulamit**, in **Rosh Pina**, discussed under the Tsfat section, for a dinner while staying in Tiberias. **Amirim** has some vegetarian restaurants, and I found **Dalia’s** to be quite delightful. Dalia herself presides over the evening, hovers and clucks lovingly over guests, the very embodiment of a doting Polish Jewish grandmother. The food is served family-style (whatever she is making that night, and lots of it!), and is *delicious*.

A final note on Tiberias—the city is about 600 feet (182 m) below sea level and is consequently quite hot in the summertime. It’s also warmer in the winter. For that reason, one way to choose between Tiberias and Tsfat (which are not far apart) is to consider what season you are traveling in. Amirim and Rosh Pina are also cooler in the summer because of their higher elevation.



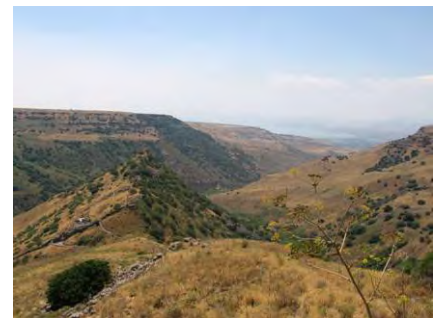
One great resource on Galilee travel generally is <http://this-is-galilee.com>. I already mentioned the lake circuit, which makes for a delightful and memorable day. This area is also the gateway to two other, major regions of Israel, the Hula Valley at the northern end of the Jordan River, and the Golan, the region that Israel conquered from Syria in the 1967 Six-Day War. Either is an easy day trip from Tiberias or anywhere in the Kinneret region.

- **The Hula Valley**, known to Israelis simply as “Ha-Hula,” is an area of marshlands that the Zionist pioneers drained in the 1940s—and eventually Israelis realized that they had inadvertently created an ecological disaster. Israel is the land bridge between the vast Eurasian landmass and Africa, and each spring and fall, millions of migratory birds traverse this tiny land, with many of the water birds landing, feeding, and resting in these marshlands. Now, they were gone. So, the Israelis reversed course and re-flooded part of the Hula, and if you are lucky enough to tour during late October or November or March and April, you can see the most spectacular flocks of cranes, pelicans, and storks



as they make their way to Africa for the winter or to Europe and Asia for the summer. Go to the **Agamon**, and you can tour either on foot for only ₪3, or you can rent a bicycle or golf cart, or you can tour on a tractor that pulls a viewing gallery (that's how I have done it). See [www.agalili.com/en/](http://www.agalili.com/en/) for more information. You can also rent binoculars there. This experience really is quite breathtaking. My late mother, may she rest in peace, was an avid birder, and she would have *loved* it!

- The **Golan** region, captured from the Syrians in the 1967 Six-Day War, is spectacular, with much to see, including the ancient city of **Qatzrin**, its modern equivalent (the capital of the Israeli Golan), and the Israeli portion of **Mount Hermon**, the highest mountain in the country, which is snow-capped much of the year and offers the country's only ski resort in the winter! Note: Despite the Syrian civil war, the Golan remains generally calm and safe. But the most spectacular site of all on the Golan, in my view, is **Gamla**, often called “the Masada of the north.” The historian Josephus tells us that in the Great Revolt of 66-70 C.E., Roman armies laid siege to this city, which sat so high on its crested ridge that “it almost seemed to hang in the air.” The town's name came from the Hebrew word for camel (*gamal*), because the distinctive hump, seen at right, looked much like a camel's back. The population at that time was swollen by Jewish refugees fleeing the Roman onslaught, and when the Roman forces broke through the defensive wall, some 9,000 Jews either jumped to their deaths from the far end of the ridge or were hurled into the ravines. The ruins are spectacularly preserved; you can even see exactly where the Romans broke through. The hike down to the ruins and back up is very rigorous; you may be able to catch a ride on a tram. In my late 50s, I'm getting a bit old for it myself. The region is also a spectacular nature reserve, with a 51-meter waterfall and one of the best protected habitats of the Griffon vulture, with a wing-span of up to 2.7 meters! These spectacular birds soar soundlessly on the thermal drafts along the ravines on each side of Gamla—on my first visit, I hit the dirt when one swooped just a meter or two over my head! They are among the most beautiful examples of birds in flight I have ever seen.



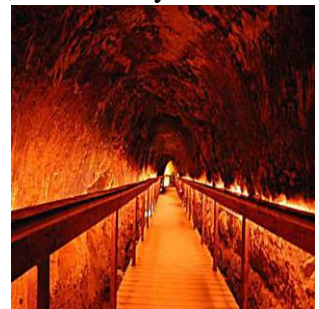
- **Banias and Tel Dan.** In Israel's far north, there are two remarkable national parks. **Banias** is a mountain where fresh water springs “magically” emerge to create one of the three tributaries that make up the Jordan River. The springs absolutely gush at the end of winter, and this made it a long-revered holy place for pagan faiths, including worship of the Greek and Roman god Pan (the name is an Arabic corruption of “Pan”). Nearby **Tel Dan National Park** is near the northern tip of Israel, right on what was the border with Syria until 1967 and where Syria, Lebanon, and Israel came together. Lebanese villages and fields are clearly visible, but that is not what we came to see. At Dan, water gushes up from the ground rather magically in several springs fed by aquifers in the Golan, and at least in March, was it ever gushing! Water roared down streams that come together and make up the second of the tributaries that feed into the Jordan. It was a beautiful sight however you cut it, but in this rain-parched land, it was glorious to see. Dan is also of great Biblical and historical interest—here the only extra-biblical evidence of King David was found, a stella referring to “Bet David” (the House of David). Even more remarkable was the excavated



and quite intact shrine that King Jeroboam erected after the collapse of the United Kingdom into separate Israel and Judah, designed to keep pilgrims of the Northern Kingdom of Israel from going to the Judahite capital of Jerusalem, with one shrine at Dan and the other at Beth-El. *See* I Kings 12:29-33. This was one of the most amazing archeological confirmations of the biblical history and text that I have ever seen.

When the time comes to leave either Tiberias or Tsfat and drive to Jerusalem, you have two choices. You can take Highway 65 to link up with Highway 6, the Trans-Israel Highway, a new toll road and superhighway that will take you to Route 1 and the road to Jerusalem. Or you can continue on to Route 4 or Route 2 along the coast, which are non-toll highways but may have brutal traffic near rush hours. Both these routes are completely inside the “Green Line,” or pre-1967 Israel. This approach also allows you to easily make two wonderful stops.

- **Mount Tabor.** This mountain, which overlooks the Valley of Jezreel from the north, is the site of two major biblical events. We read in the Book of Judges how Deborah’s general Barak vanquished Sisera, charging down from Mount Tabor “with ten thousand men behind him.” The Song of Deborah is widely believed by scholars to be one of the oldest fragments of the Hebrew Bible. In the New Testament, tradition identifies Tabor as the “high mountain” on which Jesus was transfigured before his three closest disciples, Peter, John, and James, and appeared in glory with Moses and Elijah, representing the Torah (Law) and the Prophets. The drive up the mountain is on a narrow, switchback road that can be quite unnerving—not for the timid! The view is worth it, though.
- **Megiddo.** This national park contains excavations of a *tel* (hill) with remains of cities going back to the Canaanite period (c. 3500 B.C.E.). Megiddo guards the southern side of the Valley of Jezreel as Tabor guards the north, and armies have marched through this critical pass, from Egyptians to Assyrians to Babylonians to Israelites, all the way to the British and the Israelis in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Megiddo is mentioned in the Hebrew Bible, and the park contains the remarkable ruins of gates from the time of King Solomon, the chariot city of King Ahab (and his much-maligned wife Jezebel), and most amazingly, a water system probably constructed by Ahab in the 9<sup>th</sup> Century B.C.E. with a tunnel cut through solid rock for hundreds of meters. The tunnel guaranteed that the fortress would always have water in times of siege, critical to survival in ancient times, and you can walk all the way through it! Of course, Megiddo is perhaps best known to Christians as the site of the great battle at the End of Days described in the New Testament book of Revelation. “Armageddon” is a Greek corruption of the Hebrew “Har Megiddo.”



The other route to Jerusalem is to take Route 90 south from Tiberias through the Jordan Valley and the West Bank, and then to take Highway 1 from just south of Jericho for the ascent up to Jerusalem. While the route goes through the West Bank, it is under Israeli security control and safe, though you should check on local conditions first. If you take that route, you can easily see the following sites along the way (or do so as a day trip from Tiberias, Amirim, or Tsfat):



- **Bet She'an.** Bet She'an is the site of some of the most spectacular Roman and Byzantine ruins in all Israel, with an ancient Roman theater that rivals Caesarea's. This is also the site of King Saul's defeat, and here the bodies of Saul and his son (and David's beloved friend) Jonathan were hanged from the city walls as a taunt to the Israelites. The site is breathtaking. For lunch, you could eat at **Dag Dagan** fish restaurant at the nearby **Bet Alpha National Park**; see below.



- **Belvoir.** This is the site of a major Crusader fortress that dominated the Lower Galilee. The view of the Jordan Valley and the mountains of Gilead across the river in Jordan is stunning. The name "Belvoir" in French means "beautiful view," and it is indeed. In Hebrew, the site is known as **Kochav ha-Yarden**, or "the Star of the Jordan." This was one of the last Crusader fortresses to hold out against the forces of Salah al-Din (Saladin) after the Crusader defeat at the Horns of Hittin and the collapse of the Kingdom of Jerusalem. It is quite spectacular, the best Crusader site in my view outside of Akko.
- **Bet Alpha.** This small national park contains the stunning mosaic floor of a synagogue built in the Sixth Century C.E., complete with depictions of the binding of Isaac, a Zodiac with the Greek sun god Helios at the center(!), and at the top a depiction of the Ark of the Covenant with a menorah on each side. The use of pagan imagery such as the Zodiac and the Greek sun god is very interesting; also interesting is the way that the official explanations try to minimize or explain away the rather jarring incongruity. With the conquest of Alexander the Great and later Rome, Hellenism influenced Judaism in the Land of Israel, just as the Jew Saul became the apostle Paul and brought heavy Greek influences into nascent Christianity. Physically, Bet Alpha is a "wow" experience; I literally heard nearly every visitor of every background say that word when he or she entered the room with the synagogue floor mosaic. Behind the park, you can get a great fish lunch at **Dag Dagan Fish Restaurant**. I ordered a fish called "red drum fillet"—I have no idea what that is—but in perhaps the best, botched English translation of that trip, I ordered the "red drum filet raped in mustard." I am pretty sure they were going for wrapped; I almost snorted some beer out of my nose when I read that one. (The fish was really tasty!) And as a note, the name literally means "Fish-Fisherman," but put those two words together in Israeli Hebrew parlance, and you have a slang term for "clitoris." My Israeli friends kept telling me that I *had* to have the name of this place wrong, but that is the name—and the place was full of families and children running about. See [www.this-is-galilee.com/israeli-restaurant-1.html](http://www.this-is-galilee.com/israeli-restaurant-1.html) for proof that I'm not making this up.

## The Negev—Israel's Desert South.

Most people visiting Israel for the first time do not visit Eilat and the Negev desert (the southern half of the country, shaped like an inverted triangle). Of course, your choice depends on your interests. Most first-time visitors tend to focus on the cities, culture, and history, but those who want wilderness, a more nature/eco-style trip, or beaches may well head south. Because of my experiences touring the wilds of this region with **Adam and Nadav Sela** and **Desert Eco**

**Tours** (more below), I have fallen in love with the Negev and the desert experience. And while Eilat is in some ways a resort city, I have developed an appreciation for it as well, because the locale is stunning, so it very much has become part of my Israel experience in recent years.

## The Northern Negev, Mitzpe Ramon, and the Makhtesh.



The Negev is a vast and truly spectacular desert, and if you are so inclined, by all means take some time touring it. Don't miss the **Makhtesh Ramon**, the so-called "Ramon Crater" (a makhtesh is not a crater but a geological, erosion formation unique to this region) near Mitzpe Ramon in the central Negev.<sup>2</sup> This spectacular geological formation is Israel's Grand Canyon, and it's just about as breathtaking.

There are two other, major makhteshim, the "small" and the "large," and **ha-Makhtesh ha-Katan** ("the Small Makhtesh") is in some ways more spectacular because you can see the whole formation in one glance from the rim and that gives a better understanding of how the geology works. There are only seven makhteshim in the world, five in the Negev and two in the northern Sinai, and "makhtesh" is the correct term for this formation in any language.

I have had the pleasure of touring with guide **Adam Sela** and his son **Nadav Sela** who specialize in tours of the Negev, with a particular focus on the natural and ecological aspects of the central Negev highlands. They live and work in Midreshet Ben-Gurion, just outside Sde Boqer, the kibbutz made famous as the adopted home of Israel's founder, David Ben-Gurion. **I cannot recommend Adam and Nadav highly enough**—they have showed me a side of Israel and the Negev that I not only had never seen but could never have accessed without someone like them. I had heard of "off-road jeep tours," but had no idea that one could drive a jeep where they took us! We went up mountainsides and down through winding, dry wadi beds. Adam showed us the Makhtesh Ramon—and for the first time, I really understood the unique, geological process that created it. He also showed us the remnants of the Nabataean, Roman, and ancient Israelite presence in the region over the centuries, and spectacular vistas that I would never otherwise have found, let alone be able to get to. The jeep tours are not for the faint of heart, but they are unforgettable and totally worth it. He is also a delight to spend time with. For more information on their tours, see [www.adamsela.com](http://www.adamsela.com), e-mail [office@adamsela.com](mailto:office@adamsela.com), or call Adam or Nadav at (050) 530-8272. **Nadav** also works with him as a tour guide now, and my friend and I toured with him for a full day in November 2014—**he, too, is the real deal!** In the picture to the right from our most trip, Adam sits with Brett preparing tea in a cave in the Makhtesh Ramon at the end of an unforgettable day of touring!



Some additional options to discuss with Adam or Nadav for your Negev tour:

- If you have the time and interest, Adam may be able to set you up with a lunch with local Bedouin in their tents in one of the nearby settlements. In several places in Israel, there are "Bedouin experiences" set up as tourist attractions, and frankly I see them as the equivalent of a Disney Epcot experience—sanitized and shallow. (Remember: my guide, my opinions!) This is *not* that; Adam took us to lunch at the tent of one of the major

<sup>2</sup> Some of the photos on pp. 41 and 42 are courtesy of Trip Advisor Destination Expert dw325. Thank you!

Bedouin leaders of the region. In an hour or so of conversation, I learned a great deal about the social problems facing the Bedouin, of their struggles with modernity and with the state bureaucracy, and had a glimpse of the life of these fascinating people. If you are privileged to have this experience, I offer two cautions. First, the food is prepared in genuine Bedouin style—with bare hands, some flies, and with bread baked directly on and covered by charcoals. It is not for those who are squeamish or need hyper-sanitary conditions, but it would cause great offense to decline to eat food prepared for you. If you go, that's the deal, and you need to be respectful that you are in someone's home, and honored to be a guest. I did not take pictures of my host or his family because I did not want to make him feel like a zoo exhibit for tourists. I would recommend similar restraint. It was one of the most remarkable moments of that 2009 trip.

- Sde Boqer was David Ben-Gurion's home for the last decades of his life, and he and his wife Paula are buried near there on the edge of the vast Valley of Tzin (part of the "Wilderness of Sin" in the biblical accounts of the Israelites' journey through the wilderness). The view, seen at right, will take your breath away. It is worth this brief stop, particularly near sunset.



- Israelis are known throughout the world for their expertise in water management and desert agriculture—or more poetically, for “making the desert bloom.” This water-starved country is now a world leader in desalination technology, and Israel is where drip-irrigation was invented. If you would like to learn more about the cutting-edge technology that is changing the world of agriculture, have Adam or Nadav take you to the **Ramat Negev Desert Agro-Research Center**, tel. (054) 620-9040; [www.ramat-negev.org.il](http://www.ramat-negev.org.il); e-mail [gadigr@gmail.com](mailto:gadigr@gmail.com). I learned that the cherry tomato was invented in Israel and was amazed how Israel researchers are learning to use of desalinated sea water, brackish ground water, and recovered waste water for agriculture. When I was there, a large research group from China was there to learn from this pioneering research center. California needs to learn from Israel—and fast.
- An experience to do on your own in the area, if interested, is **Astronomy Israel** with **Ira Machevsky**. Almost every night, Ira takes people out for stargazing tours in the pitch-black skies of the central Negev, away from the light-pollution that destroys night skies in urban centers all over the world. The tours are two hours, split between naked eye viewing and views through his telescopes, and are best on moonless nights. For more information, see [www.astronomyisrael.com](http://www.astronomyisrael.com) or contact Ira at [machefsky@gmail.com](mailto:machefsky@gmail.com) or by phone at (052) 544-9789. As a life-long astronomy aficionado, I enjoyed this! Bring warm clothes—the desert grows quite cold at night.



I have never been one to spend a lot on posh hotels in Israel or anywhere else. But I have enjoyed stays at a relatively new, luxury hotel built right on the lip of the Makhtesh Ramon, called the **Beresheet Hotel**, 1 Beresheet Road, Mitzpe Ramon 80600, tel. (08) 659-8004, fax (08) 659-8008; [www.isrotelexclusivecollection.com/beresheet](http://www.isrotelexclusivecollection.com/beresheet). This place is a true destination hotel and a major splurge—picture a luxury hotel on the edge of the Grand Canyon. This place is just stunning—built on the rim of the Makhtesh using





natural stone from the region so that it blends in ecologically, and some rooms have their own small pools in front. And look at the infinity pool on the edge of the Makhtesh in the photo above! One constantly sees ibex families grazing on bushes a few feet away—amazing! Contact public relations manager **Tal Magen** with any questions: tel. (08) 659-8000; [talm@isrotel.co.il](mailto:talm@isrotel.co.il). And please do tell them I recommended this beautiful place.

If the Beresheet Hotel is too expensive—and it is pricey!—you have a number of other options for places to stay in the area around Sde Boqer and Mitzpe Ramon, either of which make a good base to tour with Adam. One option if you are touring with Adam or Nadav is to take the train to Be'er Sheva and ask if they can pick you up there. One good option is a lovely B&B called **IBike** in Mitzpe Ramon, 4 Har Ardon Street in the Spice Route Quarter of the city, tel. (052) 436-7878 or (052) 361-1115, website at [www.ibike.co.il](http://www.ibike.co.il), e-mail [ibike@netvision.net.il](mailto:ibike@netvision.net.il). Hosts Aviva Angel-Scheiber and Menachem Schreiber specialize in hosting bicyclists, but all are welcome, and the environs were as charming as the hosts! You may be able to stay at the **Field School at Midreshet Ben-Gurion**, with youth hostel-style accommodations; my Trip Advisor colleagues who stayed there thought it was fine. For really basic accommodations, you could also try the **Desert Lodge at the Boqer Valley Vineyards Farm**, tel. (08) 657-3483, web site at [www.israeldesertlodge.com](http://www.israeldesertlodge.com), e-mail at [nahal.boker.@gmail.com](mailto:nahal.boker.@gmail.com). This was too rustic for me to stay overnight, but will appeal to some. It is a great place to have a meal and some good wine, and the view here as well is stunning. Finally, if you want a really different experience, you could stay at the **Naot Farm**, run by **Gadi and Lea Nahimov**, located off of Route 40, Ramat Ha-Negev 85515, tel. (054) 421-8788; [www.naotfarm.co.il](http://www.naotfarm.co.il); e-mail [info@naotfarm.co.il](mailto:info@naotfarm.co.il). This is a working goat and dairy farm that produces wonderful cheeses that are very popular in the region, and while rustic, the cabins have a lot of charm offering a true, off-the-beaten-path desert experience. Since the Negev is an alternative experience, consider alternative accommodations—and have an adventure!



Mitzpe Ramon is not a fine-dining destination, but we had a good meal with friends at **Ha-Havit (The Barrel)**, a nice, pub-style good restaurant, which is open on Friday evenings as well. You must reserve on Friday or Saturday because it is full. Tel. (08) 658-8226; [www.rol.co.il/sites/hahavit/business.html](http://www.rol.co.il/sites/hahavit/business.html). There are also much more upscale restaurants in the Beresheet Hotel.

## Eilat and Petra/Wadi Rum in Jordan.

Now we move to Israel's narrow, southern tip—the Red Sea port of Eilat. Eilat is a lovely beach and resort city, and I used to think of it as just another city of that type, not remarkable enough to warrant a visit. But my Israeli friends tend to love it, so I decided to open myself to a broader experience with my first real visit in November 2013. Some of my original feelings remain valid, but I also saw Eilat's beauty and charms, so if you have sufficient time for the rest of Israel or are making a return visit after touring other parts of the country, it is absolutely worth a stay. The city has beautiful beaches on the Red Sea, lots of water sports and related experiences, access to beautiful desert and mountain touring, and Eilat offers warm to hot weather nearly year round with views at night across the Gulf of Eilat to glittering Aqaba, Jordan as well as the coasts of Egypt (Sinai) and northwestern Saudi Arabia. I would sit on my hotel balcony every evening, gazing at four countries at once. And for many, Eilat is also the gateway to Petra and



Wadi Rum in Jordan, one of the wonders of the world for many travelers.



Eilat has more to offer than visiting the beaches, though that is the main attraction to many, including Israelis. Some other options:



- One of Eilat's most remarkable sites is the **Underwater Observatory** on Coral Beach where you can see the famous Red Sea coral reefs and fish life. The reefs have been heavily damaged by pollution from all four countries in this crowded tip of the Red Sea but the views are still spectacular. Children in particular are enthralled by this—but this “kid” was too!
- Many people also enjoy swimming with the dolphins at **Dolphin Reef**. Snorkeling and scuba diving are available; because I have asthma, albeit well controlled, I had to pass. There is some controversy about the site as well because the dolphins are effectively captive (they can jump the barrier but they stay for the food). But many rave about the experience, and it's hugely popular. See [www.dolphinreef.co.il](http://www.dolphinreef.co.il) for more information. The beach there is really lovely as well, one of the best in Eilat. You can also rent jet skis there—not sure what certifications or permits may be required.



- There are lots of places to go into the Red Sea for a swim, and it is absolutely amazing how beautiful tropical fish are swimming all around you (and occasionally jellyfish, so be careful). On our most recent trip, we went to **Barbeach**, where you can rent snorkels or even get scuba equipment to swim along the corralled off nature reserve area. It's on Coral Beach opposite the Ambassador Hotel, tel. (08) 632-5058, (057) 646-0111. It also is a good place to get some food beach-side—and try the limonana (lemonade and mint) with arak (anise liqueur)—yum!!!!
- **The Botanical Garden of Eilat** is a quiet and off-the-beaten path, different kind of experience. I really enjoyed it. Tel. (08) 631-8788; website [www.botanicgarden.co.il](http://www.botanicgarden.co.il), e-mail [bgeilat@gmail.com](mailto:bgeilat@gmail.com) for more information.
- Want to go out onto the Red Sea on a private boat? Consider a trip on **Boat Moriah** run by a delightful man named Eitan—e-mail is [eitan@hanafa.net](mailto:eitan@hanafa.net). There are other boat operators available as well at the marina.
- Not too far north of Eilat is **Timna Park**, a national park that was the site of copper mines vital to the Egyptians and King Solomon himself. The craggy desert vistas are breathtaking. You can experience it just by driving through or by bicycling or hiking trails, including nighttime tours. See [www.parktimna.co.il](http://www.parktimna.co.il) for more information. If you return to Eilat via Route 12 along the Egyptian border, the view of Eilat as you come up and over the mountains will elicit a gasp.
- You can do jeep tours of the spectacular valleys and mountains surrounding Eilat through **Desert Eco Tours** based in that city. I took a four-hour jeep tour of the Arava Valley between Israel and Jordan and the Eilat Mountains in March 2015, and it was a great experience! Desert Eco is one of the finest touring companies in all Israel; see more





about the company below. And riding on the top of the jeep is quite optional—that's me and my friend **Angela Herrstadt** (see below) on top of the jeep in this picture. It's nuts—but fun. ☺



For many people, a visit to Eilat is also the gateway to explore wonders in southwest Jordan, particularly two amazing experiences, **Petra and Wadi Rum**. Petra was the ancient capital of the Nabataeans, a once nomadic people who settled in the Negev and mountains of Edom in Jordan, and came to dominate the lucrative and vital perfume and spice trades that ran from ancient Arabia through this region and to Philistine ports in what is now the Gaza area, and from there to the Greek and Roman worlds. You can see evidence of the Nabataean trade throughout this region—trails, watchtowers, and fortifications, and of course, their breathtaking capital in Petra. Wadi Rum is a vast region of spectacular mountains, canyons, and unforgettable scenery.

- To visit **Petra** from Eilat, you must cross the border into Jordan at the Yitzhak Rabin Terminal in the Arava Valley north of Eilat. The Jordanian authorities have changed visa policies on the Eilat border in 2016. Visitors who have an embassy-issued entry visa to Jordan stamped in their passport prior to arriving at the border can disregard the following points and book their tour as usual. Visitors to Petra and Jordan without visas must provide their passport details at least 48 hours before departure so that an entry visa can be arranged in time for their tour. For Petra trips the visa is issued at a cost of \$60 per person which is payable at the border on the day of the tour. Visitors to Jordan who are not visiting Petra pay \$90 for the entrance visa. Visitors remaining two nights or more in Jordan are exempt from the visa fee but must still send their passport details at least 48 hours before departure, and it is far easier to do this if you use a touring company than on your own. So, one option to avoid the visa fee is to spend two nights in Jordan instead of one. The advantage of this is that the visa to Jordan is free and the Jordanian hotels are more reasonably priced than those in Eilat, and if you use Desert Eco Tours (see next page), a transfer service is included in the booking cost. In Jordan, many people stay at the **Movenpick Hotel** just outside the entrance to Petra; it is an expensive, European-class hotel that is conveniently located and quite lovely—but has no local character. Ask Desert Eco Tours for other options that can give a much more Jordanian experience, while still being comfortable. Staying in Aqaba is an option. Others camp out with a Bedouin tent experience—not for me, but many enjoy it. Talk with Desert Eco Tours about the option that works for you. Note that in any event, a one-day visit incurs much higher entrance fees to Petra, which are significantly discounted for overnight stays in Jordan. On its face, the new policy makes little sense and will hurt tourism, but the Jordanians are determined to capture some of this largesse, understandable for a country with limited resources and an economy much-strained from the influx of refugees from the Syrian civil war. But the new policy seems self-defeating.

You can tour Petra on your own, and as is evident from my guide, I generally favor the independent approach, but here I strongly recommend that you use **Desert Eco Tours**, an Eilat-based touring company. Contact them at (08) 632-6477 or cell (052) 276-5753; [www.desertecotours.com](http://www.desertecotours.com); e-mail [erez@desertecotours.com](mailto:erez@desertecotours.com). I had heard rave reviews of this company for years on Trip Advisor but experienced their work directly for the first time in November 2013, and they are *fabulous*! And if you use Desert Eco Tours, they can handle all the same-day visa arrangements for you if getting to a Jordanian embassy

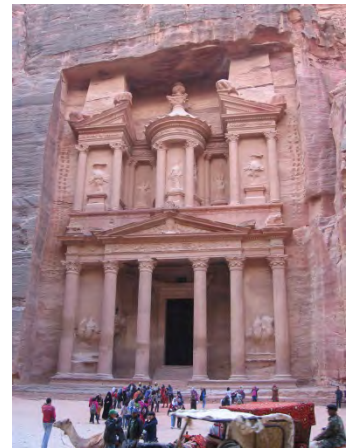
or consulate is not convenient (as is true for the vast majority of visitors!). Touring independently just got a lot more complicated, at least in this corner of the world.



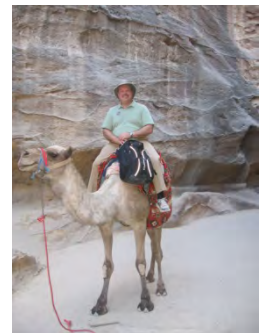
**Desert Eco Tours** is run by the amazing **Erez Herrstadt**, and I have come to know him and his wife **Angela** quite well. Erez's lifelong passion for the desert is deep and driving, and it shows in his work. His company partners with **Jordan Experience** to take tourists to Petra and Wadi Rum. When you use Desert Eco Tours, the transition from Israel to Jordan is easy and seamless—the Israeli tour operators pick you up at your hotel and take you right to the border terminal. The crossing fees are included in the tour price, and the Jordanian guides pick you up on the other side and guide you through

the Jordanian entry process. Heading back is the same in reverse—it could not be easier or less stressful.

- **Petra** is a world-renowned site, often called one of the wonders of the ancient world, and its fame was greatly enhanced when it was used as backdrop for scenes in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* and, so I'm told, in *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen*. It is about a two kilometer hike into the site through the narrow, facing cliffs of the Siq before you reach the most famous site at right, what the Bedouin called “the Treasury”—which it never was (as the Bedouin found when they unfortunately shot up the façade looking for the money). Instead it was a funeral monument in all likelihood, but when you first glimpse it through that narrow opening at the end of the Siq, it really does make people gasp in wonder. It is no wonder the Nabataeans successfully hid the site of their capital from so many—until you are right upon it, it is not at all visible!



Petra is usually crowded with tourists—and with Bedouin merchants unceasingly hawking their wares and animals to ride—and this will be a long and full day. There are places to buy lunch inside and lots of vendors. If you have the time, there is also the option to hike to the famous “Monastery” at left—again, not a monastery in fact but another funeral site—atop a mountain perhaps another kilometer and a half into the site. The monastery is in fact spectacular, as you can see, but I offer this caution. Reaching this site requires an arduous hike up a mountain for about an hour and 850 steps, much of it on uneven and challenging surfaces. I was 56 at the time, and though I work out frequently, this climb up and especially the climb down about did me in. While taking the donkeys up the mountain might be an option (though I would never do it), taking the donkeys down is *not* safe and I strongly recommend against it. On the other hand, if once down you find your ankle throbbing (as I did), taking a camel or donkey out for the long hike back to the park entrance may suddenly seem like a good idea. Of course, if you are fitter than I apparently am, this may be easier, but I *am* glad I rode out on my camel “friend.” Now I need never do that again. ☺



- Many visitors to **Petra** take a one-day tour, and if your time is limited, that is certainly an option (though with significant day fees and visa costs, as noted above). If you have

more time, however, I strongly recommend the two-day tour option through **Desert Eco Tours** where the second day is all-day off-road jeep tour of **Wadi Rum**. This desert wilderness in southern Jordan with stunning, craggy mountains all about you offers some of the most breathtaking scenery I have ever seen. This is the land of nomadic Bedouin herders, and its romantic landscapes were the scene of filming for *Lawrence of Arabia*, for this was indeed one of the main sites of the Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Turks in World War I, assisted by the legendary British officer T.E. Lawrence. One of the major battles of that revolt was the attack on the Ottoman railway (still visible in the area) and the port city of Aqaba to the south. If you take the two-day option and stay one or two nights in Jordan, discuss hotel options with Desert Eco Tours.

If you tour **Wadi Rum**, ask Desert Eco Tours to assign **Ali Hilalat** to you as your driver/guide/cook if he is available that day. I am sure that all of their guides are great—it is that fine of a tour company—but this man is just amazing. He is retired as a major



from the very distinguished Jordanian Army, and he is fascinating and a delight to get to know. Our conversations that day spanned his Muslim faith (only because I asked about the lovely Qur’anic chants he was playing in the jeep as we drove), his army history, and his acquaintance with the late, great King Hussein and the current King of Jordan, Hussein’s son Abdullah. Of course, as a guide who has lived much of his life in that area, he knows the region like the back of his hand, and he took that jeep in amazing places! On top of all that, I have to say that Ali’s grilled chicken lunch over a fire using the mesquite-style brush growing in the area was one of the best meals I

have had! But as is often the case with me, I remember people I have connected with long after a vista or historic site fades from memory, and I will *always* remember the day when Ali showed me his beloved country and landscapes while sharing his life. He is a remarkable person—and I feel the same way about **Erez and Angela**. As the saying goes, meeting them was itself “worth the price of admission.” Because of them, Eilat has become a city that I plan to visit often, a real change from my early visits.



As a major resort city, Eilat has many hotel options, most of them high rise and expensive, though there are some smaller, more-budget options. On our most recent visit, something of a honeymoon following our legal marriage after being together 31 years, we stayed at the **Isrotel Agamim** in the North Beach area, and this is a stunning hotel, even though it is not a beach hotel. But the customer service was just extraordinary; they even gave us “Just Married” tee-shirts as a gift!



And look at that view out the back of our ground floor room into the pool area (upper right)! Tel. (08) 630-0300; [www.isrotel.com/isrotel-agamim](http://www.isrotel.com/isrotel-agamim). Another choice is the hotel I stayed at in 2013, **U Suites Eilat**, also in the North Beach area. Tel. (08) 638-3333; [www.fattal-hotels.com/eilat-hotels/u-suites-eilat](http://www.fattal-hotels.com/eilat-hotels/u-suites-eilat). The views there are spectacular, and while this hotel does not have its own swimming beach, the pool facilities are wonderful, and there is a nice workout area and spa as well. But there are lots of other options; see

Trip Advisor for more suggestions, or ask Regent Tours for recommendations and prices.





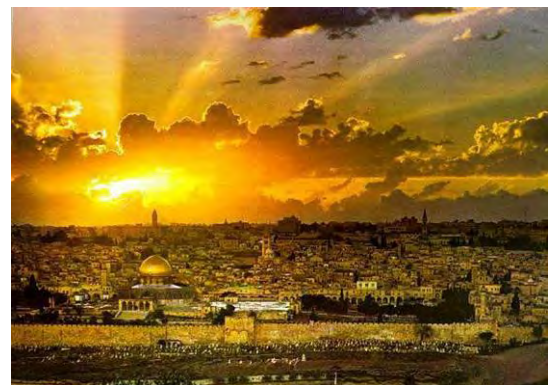
I confess that I have still not had much of a chance to sample Eilat's restaurant scene on my visits to the city. But there are lots of places to eat (see Trip Advisor or Frommer's), and here are some dining options I can recommend:

- I have had some of the best seafood meals of my life at **Pago Pago** on the North Beach Marina, tel. (08) 637-6660, e-mail [pagoeilat@bezeqint.net](mailto:pagoeilat@bezeqint.net); [www.pagorest.com](http://www.pagorest.com). It is not kosher. The food was delicious and the service was absolutely excellent! I was blown away on my most recent visit with Brett when the server remembered me from more than a year before. Pago Pago also has a beautiful view of the boats in the marina—a great resort experience. Tell owner Adi Ben Yakir, who runs what is truly one of Israel's finest restaurants, that I sent my best regards! This was Brett's favorite in the whole country.
- **Entrecote** is a burger and grill place that looks like a strip-mall joint, but it surprised me by having some sophisticated, grilled food, way beyond just hamburgers. It's popular among French visitors; that has to say something about the food, as the French know good food! It is at 68 Agmonim St., tel. (03) 863-4028, [www.rol.co.il/sites/entrecote](http://www.rol.co.il/sites/entrecote).
- A friend from Jerusalem raves about a seafood restaurant called **The Last Refuge** on Almog Beach, tel. (08) 637-6237. I have not yet been there, but I trust his taste and recommendations. My Eilati friends agree that it's a great place.
- Want a *very* different, offbeat dining experience? Check out the small, hideway café above the relaxation pools at Dolphin Reef, called **Stalbet al ha-Mayim**, tel. (08) 630-0111. You have to ask to find this place, and call ahead—Erez and Angela Hernnstadt showed it to me. It is small, not at all advertised, and has low tables with cushion seating under a thatched roof in front of a small bar. The menu is limited but quite good, the wine is tasty, and the place is funky, fun, and real Eilat. It feels a little like a cross between a backpacker's ashram and some California place trying for an Eastern-mysticism feel. I loved it—definitely not another mass-market, touristy place!

## Jerusalem—The Holy City

**Suggested Time: 6 to 7 nights.**

Why did I allocate so much time to Jerusalem? Because Jerusalem is the heart and soul of Israel and the Jewish people, and perhaps the most emotionally and spiritually charged place on Earth. The ancients thought that Jerusalem was the center of the world, the “navel of the world,” or the very “foundation stone of creation.” From my standpoint, that's about right. For me, Jerusalem is quite simply the most remarkable city in the world.



Jerusalem was divided between Israel and Jordan after the 1948 War for Independence, and the Old City, with all of its holy sites, was held by Jordan and barred to Jews for 19 years. Like Berlin in the Cold War, Jerusalem was a bitterly divided city with walls and barbed wire at its



heart. In the Six-Day War, Israel captured the Old City together with the West Bank and reunited the city, annexing the eastern part. The city is still often referred to by its parts, though: The New City (West Jerusalem, Jewish); the Old City (the small, walled, ancient city); and East Jerusalem (the modern, mostly Arab section to the east), and to a large degree, it remains culturally and politically divided, in spite of being officially united. While I feel less comfortable walking around the Old City at night, and you should keep your wits about you at all times, don't be intimidated by the crowds and the sometimes chaotic feel. I have walked all over the Old City on every trip and never had problems, except the one camera theft I mentioned earlier. Given recent events, however, I would recommend avoiding the Damascus Gate area and the Muslim Quarter around Friday prayer time. That's it—otherwise, you're fine.

To make it even more confusing, the Old City has four traditional quarters. They are the Christian Quarter (northwest), the Muslim Quarter (northeast), the Armenian Quarter (southeast), and the Jewish Quarter (southwest). Each quarter has a distinct character, though there are no fixed divisions or markers and there is some diversity of population in each of the quarters.



I have long stayed at the **Three Arches Hotel in the Jerusalem International YMCA**, 26 King David Street, P.O. Box 294, Jerusalem 91002 Israel, tel. (02) 569-2692.

This is *not* like staying in YMCAs in the United States; this is not transient housing. It is in a beautiful stone building (pictured at right), built by the British in 1931 and designed by the same architect who did the Empire State Building in New York City. The location cannot be beat: directly across the street from the King David Hotel (Israel's most prestigious hotel) and a 15-minute walk from the Old City. While the YMCA Hotel had declined in the 2000s, this remarkable institution is truly coming back under the leadership of the new CEO of the Jerusalem International YMCA, Amos Gil. I met him—he is an amazing and inspiring man. There is work yet to do, to be sure—but the direction of the place is *very* positive. I was not sure if it was a good idea to take Brett there, but even though it was the most basic place we stayed, he really loved it—simple but clean accommodations, great service, excellent breakfasts, and tons of character! If you need your hotel to be upscale or near-perfect, this is probably not the place for you. But I remain in love with the place and frankly can't imagine staying anywhere else.



My loyalty to the YMCA primarily stems from its mission, however. The staff includes Jews, Christian Arabs, and Muslim Arabs, and the programming is interfaith for all three religions, including the world-renowned Jewish-Arab preschool program I mentioned earlier in this guide. At breakfast, it is a real treat to watch the parade of parents (mostly daddies, actually) escorting their adorable kids into the preschool; it is one of the real perks of the place! People from all over the world and many Israelis stay there as well. The Jerusalem International YMCA is in the New City on King David Street, but only a 10-15-minute walk from the Jaffa Gate into the Old City. You can get more information about the YMCA and its hotel at [www.jerusalemymca.org](http://www.jerusalemymca.org). I note, though, that the YMCA restaurant is not kosher for visitors needing that. For more hotel information, price inquiries, or registration, e-mail [y3arches@netvision.net.il](mailto:y3arches@netvision.net.il). If this is your choice, you need to book directly here; Regent Tours does not work with the YMCA.

But in the interest of giving you a range of hotel choices, there are two, newer boutique hotels that have generally received very good reviews on Trip Advisor, though I have no direct

experience with either of them yet: The **Harmony Hotel**, 6 Yoel Salomon Street ([www.atlas.co.il/harmony-hotel-jerusalem](http://www.atlas.co.il/harmony-hotel-jerusalem)); and the **Dan Boutique Hotel** in the German Colony area ([www.danhotels.com/JerusalemHotels/DanBoutiqueJerusalemHotel](http://www.danhotels.com/JerusalemHotels/DanBoutiqueJerusalemHotel)) at 31 Hebron Road. The Harmony's location is ideal, right off of the Ben-Yehuda street mall area, but prices have gone way up, so it is no longer the real deal that it once was. The **Arthur Hotel** is a newer Atlas Hotel entry and I hear good things; it may be more reasonably priced than its sister hotel The Harmony. Another choice is the **Prima Royale Hotel** not far from the YMCA, but again I have never stayed there, though most reports have been positive. The **Eldan Hotel** next door to the YMCA is a clean, modern, and reasonable option, and if you book it with your rental car, you can get a price break. But the hotel doesn't have much character. If you want to splurge and spoil yourself, of course, there is always the option of the historic and very opulent **King David Hotel** across the street from the YMCA or its newer competitor, the **David Citadel Hotel** just down the street. Other good choices in the central city area (truly the best place to say) include the **Dan Panorama** and the **Inbal Hotel**, both well established and fine hotels. If you really want a classic, different experience, check out the **Mount Zion Hotel** overlooking the Valley of Gehinnom and the Old City, located not far from the German Colony on Derech Hebron Street, tel. (02) 568-9555; [www.mountzion.co.il](http://www.mountzion.co.il). It really does have extraordinary character; I may try it for a different experience on a future trip.

You can find other options on Trip Advisor as well. I would also recommend that you discuss these and other possible Jerusalem alternatives with Regent Tours, which probably can get you a significant price break.

There are less expensive, guesthouse options in the New City as well. On my 2012 trip, I stayed at **the St. Andrew's Scottish Guest House**, known to Jerusalemites as "the Scotty." Located at 1 David Remez Street off King David Street, south of the YMCA and King David Hotel—tell the cab driver it's "the St. Andrew's Scottish Church," or he may not know it. Tel. (02) 673-2401, website [www.scotsguesthouse.com](http://www.scotsguesthouse.com), e-mail [info@scotsguesthouse.com](mailto:info@scotsguesthouse.com). It is basic but has charm, and I liked it. Warning—there is no elevator, and walking up to the third floor every day after a whole day of walking the city got a little old. Breakfasts were good but not spectacular. The staff is very helpful, especially the wonderfully warm Jakoub who will bid you "Welcome!!" a dozen times a day. And the view of the southern parts of the Old City is breathtaking! I think the best, more affordable option in the city now may be the **Abraham Hostel**, located in the New City at 67 Ha-Nevi'im Street on Davidka Square, tel. (02) 650-2200; [www.abrahamhostels.com/jerusalem](http://www.abrahamhostels.com/jerusalem); [info@abrahamhostels.com](mailto:info@abrahamhostels.com). In addition to a very well regarded, reasonably priced place to stay with the chance to meet other travelers from round the world, the Abraham Hostel is renowned for the tours it offers, for guests and non-guests alike. For a Jewish guesthouse, consider **Bet Shmu'el** at the Jerusalem campus of the Hebrew Union College (the Reform seminary based in my city of Cincinnati, I'm proud to say) on Eliyahu Shama'a Street off King David Street, next to the David Citadel Hotel, tel. (02) 620-3455; (02) 620-3456, [www.bshmu-el.com/en](http://www.bshmu-el.com/en).

Finally, while I generally recommend that people stay in the center city area in the New City, some prefer to stay in the Old City for its atmosphere and centrality to the holy sites. Be aware, though, that some people feel uncomfortable walking in the Old City at night, not because it's dangerous but because it's mostly empty and a little spooky. Staying there not like staying in the center-city areas in European cities; the Old City truly shuts down at night. But if you do want

the Old City experience, I recommend the **Lutheran Guest House** that is connected to the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer in the Christian Quarter on St. Mark's Road, tel. (02) 626-6888. See the website at <http://luth-guesthouse-jerusalem.com> for more information. It is a clean, lovely, and well-run property that has been recently renovated, and is close to the Jaffa Gate for easier access to the New City. For other options, **The Austrian Hospice** in the Muslim Quarter is another lovely building with clean rooms, but I would find walking in that area at night quite daunting, particularly given the current political climate in the Arab parts of the city. Some people like staying at the **Christ Church Guest House**, an Anglican institution just inside the Jaffa Gate, but I am very much opposed to their historic mission of evangelizing Jews. (Again, my guide—my opinions!)



I strongly recommend that you don't bother with a rental car in Jerusalem; it is a bewildering and difficult city to drive in and even worse to park in! Just return your rental car when you arrive and take cabs, buses, or the new light rail inside the city, which is wonderful! For cab drivers, I recommend **David Mizrachi**, my favorite in the city; you can reach him at (052) 481-6950. Other good drivers include **Lior Dabush** at (050) 955-9505; [lior955@gmail.com](mailto:lior955@gmail.com); **Yehuda Levi** at (052) 240-7080, and **Golani** at (050) 544-9298 or (052) 565-2807; [golani18@hotmail.com](mailto:golani18@hotmail.com). Finding a cab on the street will be safe and fine, but for trips within the city, **always insist on using the meter and get out if they will not turn it on**. One easy way to do that is to ask for a receipt (*kabbalah*) when you get in; the driver cannot generate a receipt without using the meter. I had fewer fights on this issue recently, but it still happens. **Avoid the cabs that gather in front of the King David Hotel!** They are sharks who consistently try to charge grossly inflated, flat rates, while claiming ridiculous things like "I don't have a meter." Walk down the street a little bit to the David Citadel Hotel; for some reason, the taxi drivers there are more honest, even though it's just as upscale of a hotel. If you catch a cab at the Jaffa Gate, be aware that your driver may be Arab and less familiar with destinations in the western parts of the New City. That may be an issue if you are not yourself sure of how to get where you want to go. Otherwise, it doesn't matter.

Some Israeli Jewish cab drivers may also be reluctant to go to parts of East Jerusalem (for example, the Mount of Olives), particularly at night or on Fridays, and they cannot by law drive into areas controlled by the Palestinian Authority, such as Bethlehem. You can easily catch Arab cabs or buses near the Damascus Gate to access those areas if needed. In fact, Arab cab drivers will constantly ask if they can take you to Bethlehem; saying "no" repeatedly gets wearying.



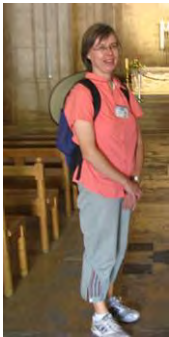
Jerusalem is endlessly fascinating. Without exaggeration, you could spend weeks or even months in this city and not run out of things to see and do. But since you don't likely have that much time, I offer these suggestions for day-to-day itineraries.

## **Days One and Two:**

Wander through the Old City, preferably on a walking tour of the Four Quarters. Your best bet may be the **free Four Quarters walking tours offered by Sandeman's** every day starting at 11:00 a.m. and 2:00 p.m.; see [www.newjerusalem tours.com](http://www.newjerusalem tours.com) for more information. The guides are not paid, however, so please plan to tip at least ₪50 per person. Another option is to hire one of my favorite guides from the now defunct Zion Walking Tours; he is an Armenian Jerusalemite named **Aram Khatchadourian**, who can take you into the Armenian Quarter, which is

usually inaccessible to outsiders except for a few areas because it's largely residential, along with a more traditional tour of the rest of the Old City. You can reach him at (050) 735-1859 (cell) or (02) 626-4537 (home).

### **Touring with Madeleine Lavine:**



You may want to hire a private guide to see all that this amazing city has to offer, and **my strong recommendation on that score is Madeleine Lavine**, who served on the YMCA staff before taking up full-time guiding. (Madeleine is pictured on the left.) She is knowledgeable, very pleasant, professional, and has a delightful, dry sense of humor that shows her roots in Leeds, England. Madeleine offers a wide range of tours; even though I have been to Jerusalem fifteen times and explored seemingly everywhere, she consistently shows me aspects of the city that are new to me. She also offers individual or group Four Quarters tours, tours of the Mount of Olives and the Old City, and just about anything you can imagine.

Madeleine is also licensed to drive people around the country as well. **Madeleine is my top recommendation for a tour guide for Jerusalem and elsewhere in Israel, and I cannot speak highly enough of her. You can reach her at [madl@smile.net.il](mailto:madl@smile.net.il), or (054) 450-4098 (cell) or (02) 678-0058 (home).** You can also learn more about her work by reading her blog at [www.touringwithmadeleine.blogspot.com](http://www.touringwithmadeleine.blogspot.com). There are other guides who enjoy good reputations, and still others, including some recommended on Trip Advisor, whom I have met and would frankly avoid. If you wish, you can e-mail me privately for more information on others. But trust me—you're in good hands with Madeleine.

Whether with a guide or on your own, key sites in the Old City include the **Arab Market** on David Street inside the Jaffa Gate, and **Burnt House and Herodian House**, the remains of wealthy homes of priestly families destroyed when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem at the end of the Great Revolt in 70 C.E. Of course, you will want to see the **Western Wall and Temple Mount** (which Muslims call **al-Haram al-Sharif**, the "Noble Sanctuary"), pictured at right. The hours for non-Muslim tourists to visit Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif vary at this writing, but are generally 9:00-11:00 a.m. and some hours in the early afternoon as well. It is not open to non-Muslims on Fridays, the Muslim prayer day, or on Shabbat. The **Dome of the Rock** shrine atop Temple Mount is the most beautiful thing made by human hands I have ever seen. When you go onto Temple Mount, you will have to pass strict Israeli security, but remember that the Islamic religious trust (the Waqf) has jurisdiction on the Mount itself. Unfortunately, non-Muslims are not permitted inside either the **Dome of the Rock** or **Al-Aqsa Mosque**, and I have no idea if this ban will ever be lifted. The closure stems from the conflicts of 2000; it is purely political and very unfortunate, and recent (and false) claims that the Israelis are trying to change the "status quo" at the site have made tensions even worse. It's a tense place and conditions can change day to day.



There is one, possible way to get into Al-Aqsa and the Dome of the Rock. **Sam Salem**, who worked for years at the UN headquarters for Middle East operations in Jerusalem, now leads tour groups, and through his connections, he **can take occasionally small groups of non-Muslim visitors along with VIP tours into the Dome of the Rock and Al-Aqsa Mosque.** Such visits



are limited to once or twice a month and are never guaranteed, but tell him you found him through my guide, and he may be able to do this for you—no promises! Remember that the Waqf (Islamic Trust) that controls Temple Mount may cancel access to those holy sites at any time without notice, even if Sam had prior approval for a tour, and that is a risk any visitor has to assume. **You can reach Sam at (054) 482-8207 or at [guide.holy@gmail.com](mailto:guide.holy@gmail.com). Note:** Inside these sites, **one cannot visibly pray or engage in any act of non-Muslim worship or devotion**—to do so will create a major incident and could jeopardize Sam’s access permanently.



Sam also offers tours of the Old City of Jerusalem, Jericho, Bethlehem, Herodian, and Hebron. I have used Sam to tour Temple Mount, including the insides of the Muslim shrines (see the photo on left from inside the Dome of the Rock!), as well as Bethlehem and Hebron. Plus Sam is about the sweetest, kindest man you can imagine. **Full disclosure:** Sam is not licensed as a guide in Israel. While this is a matter of controversy on the Trip Advisor forum, I have decided that this is irrelevant to me when it comes to touring

sites outside the Green Line (pre-1967 Israel), though I don’t use him within Israel proper. I find Sam delightful to tour with, and have received nothing but positive comments from others who have used him. You can obviously decide for yourself as an adult. Some on Trip Advisor have questioned whether he has liability insurance when driving paying passengers; Sam insists he is insured to transport passengers, and I trust him. You can ask yourself if concerned.

Remember that the Temple Mount/al-Haram al-Sharif is holy to more people than any other place on Earth, and it is very contentious. It is a tense place, but if it is not safe to go up, the security authorities won’t allow you to go. This small hilltop is charged with religious emotion, history, and political struggles. But don’t miss it.

### **Other group touring options:**

While we’re on the topic of guides and group tours, I will share contact information for a number of companies that offer group tours, either walking tours or via vehicles, both for Jerusalem and the country as a whole. I thank a Trip Advisor user who goes by “DC Suburbanite” for this excellent list! I can’t personally endorse any companies other than the Western Wall Tunnel Tours (discussed below). But contact information for some tour providers is listed on the bottom of this page and the top of the next:

**Bein Harim Daily Tours** (offers both an economy class and a business class)  
Phone: (03) 546-8870  
Website: [www.beinharim.co.il/English.html](http://www.beinharim.co.il/English.html)  
E-mail: [info@beinharim.co.il](mailto:info@beinharim.co.il)

**David Tours**  
Phone: (02) 627-1179  
Website: [www.davidstours.com](http://www.davidstours.com) (note the “s” in the address)  
E-mail: [dtours@zahav.net.il](mailto:dtours@zahav.net.il)

**Egged Tours** (this is the omnipresent Israeli bus company)  
Phone: (03) 920-3998 or (03) 920-3919

Website: [www.egged.co.il/eng](http://www.egged.co.il/eng) (click on tourism at top of page then select “Line 99 bus tour” or “Tours around Holy Land”)  
E-mail: [limord@eggedtours.co.il](mailto:limord@eggedtours.co.il)

**Eshet**  
Phone: (03) 693-7777 (only if you book hotel through them).

**Jerusalem’s Municipal Government walking tours**  
Saturday mornings at 10:00 a.m., at 32 Jaffa Street near Russian compound  
Phone: (02) 531-4600, (02) 531-4106  
E-mail: [jereng@jerusalem.muni.il](mailto:jereng@jerusalem.muni.il)

### **Knesset Tours**

English language tours on Sunday and Thursday  
Phone: (02) 675-3420 or (02) 675-3416  
Website: [www.knesset.gov.il](http://www.knesset.gov.il)  
E-mail: [feedback@knesset.gov.il](mailto:feedback@knesset.gov.il)

### **Ofakim**

Phone: (03) 761-0610  
Website: [www.ofakim.co.il](http://www.ofakim.co.il) (Hebrew and Russian only)

### **Authentic Israel**

Phone: (03) 630-6306; in U.S. (202) 248-1260 or (800) 600-5194  
Website: [www.authenticisrael.com](http://www.authenticisrael.com) – click on “Daily Tours” and then “Bus Tours”  
E-mail: [info@authenticisrael.com](mailto:info@authenticisrael.com)

### **Western Wall Tunnel Tours**

Phone: (02) 627-1333  
Website: [english.thekotel.org/content.asp?id=226](http://english.thekotel.org/content.asp?id=226)  
E-mail: [contact-english@thekotel.org](mailto:contact-english@thekotel.org)

### **United Tours**

Phone: (02) 625-2187, (03) 616-2656, (03) 693-3412  
Website: [www.inisrael.com/united](http://www.inisrael.com/united)

### **Sandeman Tours**

Website: [www.newjerusalemstours.com](http://www.newjerusalemstours.com)

### **Abraham Tours**

Website: [www.abrahamstours.com](http://www.abrahamstours.com)

## **Day Three:**

By rental car, travel to **Masada** on the shore of the **Dead Sea**. (Numerous companies, including United and Egged, also offer small guided tours via vans, and Abraham Tours offers less expensive transportation-only group trips with no guide.) Masada is stunning, beautiful, and simply unforgettable. Masada or “Metzada”, which means “fortress” in Hebrew, was a flat mountaintop fortified by the Maccabees following their revolt against the Greeks in 165 B.C.E., and King Herod later chose this mountain as the site for his fortified winter palace. But it is best known as the last holdout of nearly a thousand Jewish defenders after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. The Zealots held off the Tenth Roman Legion for more than a year, but eventually after the Romans breached the walls, all but six took their own lives rather than “live” as Roman slaves. New Israeli soldiers often climb Masada to take an oath that “Masada shall not fall again.” You can be a purist and hike to the top via the Snake Path (moderately strenuous, takes about an hour, and the word “snake” refers to the path’s shape, not the presence of slithering reptiles). Or you can take the cable car. The view is unforgettable, and if you close your eyes, you can almost hear the final, defiant speech of Jewish commander Eleazar ben-Yair to his doomed followers. Like most visitors, I find Masada haunting.



**PLEASE NOTE:** the Dead Sea is some 423 meters (1,388 feet) below sea level (the lowest point on Earth) and is hot year around—take *lots* of water and sun protection with you, including hats. If you’re going to hike, start very early, particularly in the warmer months. In the summer, it will be a brutal experience by mid-morning. Be sure to force water—up to a liter every hour or two. Do not wait until you are thirsty; by then, it is too late to catch up. Because of rapid evaporation, you will be unaware of how much you are losing through sweat. Not to be gross, but if your urine is deep yellow, you’re dehydrating and need to drink more!

In 2006 I hiked to the top of Masada at sunrise, accompanied by an amazing guide from the neighboring kibbutz at Ein Gedi (see below). He is known by one and all as **Zabu**. Zabu is in his 70s or more, has a long, gray beard and actually looks a little like a gnome. Don’t underestimate him based on age or size; that man hiked Masada in sandals in 50 minutes flat without a break (except to check on me)! He worked on some of the original excavations of the site in the 1960s, and will give you wonderful insights on what you are seeing. Note, though, that Zabu’s take on the Masada story is not traditional, and he will give you grist for thought that does not fit the common heroic mythology—he sees the Zealots who made Masada their final

stand as religious extremists who brought disaster on the Jewish people. (He is not alone; the legacy of Masada is now the subject of a broader debate within Israeli society.) But more than that, Zabú is simply a local institution. He has lived on the kibbutz since the early 1960s, he never stops, and just mentioning his name to a fellow kibbutznik brings a smile and a story! Zabú is an Israeli experience in his own right. After the paid tour, he walked my friend Louis and me around the kibbutz and asked how long we had known each other. When I explained we had been friends since our undergraduate and law school days (dating back 30 years at that point), he actually blessed us and made us promise to remain friends for life. It was quite moving. **You can reach Zabú on his cell at (052) 387-5022, or through his son Danny at [dlevyim@netvision.net.il](mailto:dlevyim@netvision.net.il).** I know I say this about everyone I refer to, but truly *do* say “shalom” (and give him a hug) for me. I love this man, as everyone seems to.

After Masada, you can then drive to **Ein Gedi**, an oasis on the Dead Sea with its own beach and spa where you can experience the mineral baths and the mud baths, both of which are reputed to be good for the skin, and then go in the Dead Sea to float. The water is about 30% minerals and it is impossible to sink. Note: take foot gear (more than flip flops) out with you that you can take into the water or you’ll cut your feet, and *whatever you do, do not try to swim or put your head in the water*. If it gets in your eyes, nose, or mouth, you’ll feel like you’re going to die. Just sit gently backwards in it and bob. It really is cool, and yes, that is me bobbing in the water with the foolish “look, ma, no hands!” pose. I note that young children are sometimes spooked by the unexpected buoyancy, and when spooked, children tend to flail, with quite painful results both for their eyes and those of others nearby. So I’d skip this experience with younger kids. By the way, Ein Gedi’s “spa” is basic, but it was good enough for me for a quick dip, which is all I ever do. Currently, a number of the Dead Sea “beaches” are closed because of the serious sinkhole problem; another option on the northern side is the Kalia Beach. Check for confirmation when you travel.



If you want to stay at the Dead Sea for a night, there are a host of luxury hotels from which to choose, particularly in the Ein Bokek area further to the south. (Note: Ein Bokek hotels and beaches appear unaffected by the sinkhole problem.) Doing so would probably allow you to cut one day off of your Jerusalem itinerary, since you would have already visited Masada and the Dead Sea. Of course, you can stay in the luxury spa hotels in Ein Bokek if that is what you are looking for. But if you want a *real* Dead Sea experience in an ancient oasis now settled by a modern kibbutz, check out the **guesthouse at Kibbutz Ein Gedi**. The kibbutz guest house offers very nice, if basic, accommodations. (The highest level rooms are *arugot* rooms, but the Desert-level rooms are fine and less expensive; don’t go below that level, because the other rooms will be very basic and dormitory-like.) Staying here gives you a little taste of kibbutz life; for example, you will eat in a dining hall, which gives you a chance to interact with kibbutzniks on some level. Ein Gedi is an ancient oasis mentioned repeatedly in the Bible, most famously as the place the young David hid from the wrathful King Saul, and the kibbutz has a world-renowned botanical garden. Be sure to visit the **Wadi David** with a lovely, small waterfall, and the ancient synagogue excavated nearby. Even if you don’t use him to tour Masada, be sure to meet Zabú while visiting Ein Gedi. Just ask after him; *everyone* knows him. They call him “Saba Zabú” (“Grandpa Zabú.”) Can you tell I love this man? So do they, even the young kibbutz members.

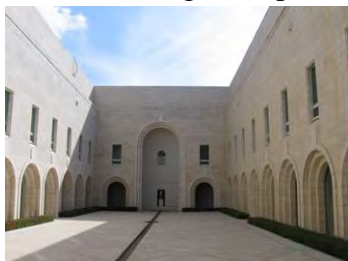


After the Dead Sea, I also recommend a stop at **Qumran**, the community (probably the ancient Essenes) where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found. It's an interesting site, particularly with a recent (and relatively well done, only semi-cheesy) interpretive film, and it's right on your way back to Jerusalem. It's hard to find more evocative history than this!

#### Day Four:



Tour the western parts of the New City. I highly recommend at least a half day at **Yad Vashem**, Israel's Holocaust Memorial. It is terrifying and moving, and very well done. The new historical museum truly does justice to the story of the murder of six million European Jews. Be sure to see the Children's Memorial, the most evocative memorial to grief and loss that I have ever experienced. The first time I went through, I was in tears and my knees were shaking, but I was grateful for this remembrance of the one and a half million children murdered in the Holocaust. After that you can go to the **Israel Museum**, known as the museum of the Jewish people. It is best known for housing the Dead Sea Scrolls in the famous Shrine of the Book (pictured at right), but it has a world-renowned archaeological wing, an excellent collection of Judaica through the ages (including four historic synagogues relocated to the museum), and an excellent modern art and impressionist collection. See [www.english.imjnet.org.il/](http://www.english.imjnet.org.il/). The Israel Museum is also the home of a famous model of First Century Jerusalem that really helps you picture the city in the time of Herod's Second Temple. The **Bible Lands Museum** next door is worth seeing as well, if you have the time; [www.blmj.org](http://www.blmj.org). You can also tour the **Knesset**, Israel's Parliament. Overall, the building is generally unremarkable unless you are interested in Israeli politics (which makes ours look tame, by the way), but there are spectacular murals in the Knesset reception hall painted by Marc Chagall, depicting themes from Jewish history. You need to arrange the Knesset visit in advance because of security screening. **Note:** a new policy bars jeans, tank tops, open-toed shoes, or revealing clothing while visiting the Knesset. The lawyer in me suggests that you visit the **Israel Supreme Court** nearby, an architecturally interesting building (much more so than the Knesset), pictured at left. You can take a free tour in English at 12:00 noon Sunday through Thursday, but must make a prior reservation at (02) 675-9612 or 675-9613.



You may want to spread this over two days, since Yad Vashem can take most of a day and can be emotionally exhausting. To do both on the same day will make for a fast-paced and long day.

#### Day Five:

Explore some more in the Old City. If you're interested, go to the **Church of the Holy Sepulcher** in the Christian Quarter. Be aware, though, that many North American and Western European Christians find this church to be very foreign and even bewildering, and as a result, they are often disappointed. Six ancient sects share the church today, some of which you may never have heard of. The squabbles among clergy over the use of the church are legendary, sometimes even erupting into fistfights. It is cramped, sprawling, noisy, sometimes smelly (too many people, too little bathing, and too much incense), but fascinating. This is worth touring with a guide. Also, see this remarkable site explaining the church in detail: [www.generationword.com/jerusalem101/52-](http://www.generationword.com/jerusalem101/52-)





[holy-sepulcher.html](#). If possible, ask your guide to show you the Chapel of St. Vartan with its “Lord, we have arrived” graffito in the subterranean grottos of the First or Second Centuries. It is below the Armenian section and is not open to the public, but you might get lucky if your guide (such as Aram Khatchadourian) has good Armenian Orthodox contacts. If you get in, you are very fortunate, and please give a donation of ₪20 or more to the priest who lets you in. Also, don’t miss a quiet and moving part of the church, the **Ethiopian Coptic quarters** on the roof. (Access it by going up the stairs, just outside the church to the right of the main entrance.) In the small chapel below the roof, you will see a painting of the meeting of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, from which both Ethiopian Copts and Ethiopian Jews trace their origins. This is the most peaceful part of the church, and the stately and dignified Ethiopian monks seem happier than most to answer your questions and show you around. Leave them a small contribution, as they are the decided underdogs in this chaotic place.

Finally, while **the Edicule** is the traditional (and always crowded) tomb of Christ, have your guide show you the small Syrian chapel opposite the Coptic chapel off of the rotunda. There you will find a true Jewish burial cave from the Second Temple period. This will give you a sense of how Jesus was buried and why many scholars believe that the Church of the Holy Sepulcher is actually the most likely site of the crucifixion and burial of Jesus of Nazareth.



The **Western Wall Tunnel tour** starts at the Western Wall and follows a tunnel underground and along the unexposed part of the Western Wall, and it shows much more of the remains of Herod’s Temple complex. It emerges in the Muslim Quarter. You must arrange this in advance through the Western Wall Heritage Foundation. For more information about the Western Wall tunnel tours, including how to reserve a spot, see <http://english.thekotel.org>. To make reservations, call 972-2-627-1333 from outside Israel or 1-59-951-5888 inside the country. The web site also offers live streaming video of the Western Wall, also known as the Kotel (in Hebrew, “*ha-kotel ha-ma’aravi*”). For Christians, please

note that most Jews don’t use the term “The Wailing Wall,” and while it is not a slur, many find that term mildly offensive or at least off-putting. Jews have come home; they aren’t “wailing” anymore.

The picture at the right is my close friend Louis and I at the Kotel on the last day of our trip in November 2006. I am the short one on the right, in the hat. I offer some notes about visiting the Western Wall, which is an emotional highpoint of any visit to Jerusalem:



- Men and women pray in different areas that are strictly segregated, in accordance with Orthodox Jewish practice. I don’t like it, but that is how it is. The limitation on women’s roles at the site is a deeply controversial issue in some quarters, accepted in others. A new, egalitarian prayer area has been promised in the area of Robinson’s Arch in the more southern part of the Western Wall—we’ll see when and if that actually comes to pass given Israel’s contentious religio-political infighting.
- If you are male, ultra-Orthodox Jews may ask you to pray with them or to don tefillin (leather boxes containing Scripture worn at morning prayer, but not on Shabbat or most holidays). Of course, that might be of interest to you if you are Jewish. It is not an option if you are not. If you’re non-Jewish, just tell them that, and that will end the issue.

If you are Jewish and still not interested, just say you would like to pray alone, but you may have to be persistent to the point of bluntness. The prayer requests can be relentless to the point of being irritating.

- Men will have to wear head-coverings (a *kippa* or any other hat), even if not Jewish.
- On Shabbat, do not take photographs, use your cell phone, or smoke cigarettes in the prayer area of the Wall. Be respectful here.

## Shopping.

While I am not a big shopper on Israel trips, Madeleine Lavine showed me an extraordinary photography shop called **Elia Photo Service** in the Christian Quarter at 14 Al-Khanka Street. The owner, an Armenian named Kevork Kahvedjian, is the son of an extraordinary photographer who took black-and-white photographs of life in Jerusalem and the Land of Israel in the period of the mid-1920s through the 1960s. Check out [www.eliaphoto.com](http://www.eliaphoto.com) for a sample of his beautiful work; I was transfixed by these photographs, and purchased a stunning photograph of the Old City from the Mount of Olives in 1924. It's worth a visit.



Brett and I love original art, and on our most recent visit, **we discovered a really wonderful artist and art teacher in the neighborhood of Yemin Moshe named Pnina Frank**; her studio is located at 9 Yemin Moshe Street. For information and samples of her work, see [www.pninafrank.com](http://www.pninafrank.com); tel. (052) 891-1642, e-mail [pninart@gmail.com](mailto:pninart@gmail.com). Brett bought one of her paintings of a Jerusalem vista—and we just love it!

Then there is my favorite shop and shopkeeper in all Jerusalem, **Yousef Natsheh of the Josef Natsheh Emporium** at 30 Christian Quarter Street; tel. (02) 627-4537, cell (052) 238-6465. Yousef (pictured with me at right; he is on the right) is from an old Hebron family, and he is warm, welcoming, and doesn't pressure you to buy. Stop and have some tea or coffee with him, and if that is all you do, it will be fine. He will show you things, but takes "no, thanks" for an answer, and he is quite a special man. My guide and friend **Madeleine Lavine** calls him "my mate," and often stops in after long days of touring just to visit with this kind soul; he has become my good friend as well. But beyond that, he has amazing textiles, carpets, and scarfs, and I have purchased two woven table runners of a material called "Suzani." People rave about them! Another place for upscale textiles and designs is **Maro Sandrouni**, an artistic designer at 27 St. George Street; tel. (02) 627-7177, cell (054) 584-9034; [msandrouni@bezeqint.net](mailto:msandrouni@bezeqint.net).



Another nice place to shop—and to help a worthwhile program in the process—is the gift shop at **Yad La-Kashish**, 14 Shivtei Israel Street, tel. (02) 628-7829 or 628-9737, [www.lifeline.org.il](http://www.lifeline.org.il). This organization is designed to provide meaningful work to elderly and needy residents of Jerusalem, mostly immigrants from the former Soviet Union, Ethiopia, and South America. You can see the workshop where the artisans work, and the gift shop offers their hand-made items at very reasonable costs, including cards, wall-hangings, mezuzot, and other Judaica. Many people touring the Old City are interested in souvenirs, particularly religious items, and the shuk (Arab

market) is full of them. You need to bargain, and the shuk can be very overwhelming to those not used to it. I suggest that you go see **Henry or his brothers George and Jack at Rex**, a jewelry and souvenir shop just inside the Jaffa Gate right after you enter the market at 3 David Street, tel. (02) 628-4865, [www.rexjewelers.com](http://www.rexjewelers.com), e-mail [rex\\_s@netvision.net.il](mailto:rex_s@netvision.net.il). These guys will let you shop without hassle or intimidation, and I know and trust them. Tell them I sent you—but still feel free to bargain. It's expected.

If you are looking for a licensed antiquities dealer, particularly ancient coins with certificates of authenticity, check out **Mishirky Antiquities** run by **Zak Samer** at 24 Christian Quarter Road, tel. (054) 635-3357; [www.oldcityjerusalemgifts.com](http://www.oldcityjerusalemgifts.com); e-mail [zakshop24@gmail.com](mailto:zakshop24@gmail.com). His shop is very close to Josef's Emporium, and for not a lot of money, I delighted some children from our church at home with coins from figures mentioned in the Bible—be clear about what you want to spend, but Zak is honest and fair.

For fine Judaica, your best bet is the shops along King David Street and in the Ben Yehuda pedestrian mall area. You can find everything from antiques to brilliant, modern interpretations of traditional Jewish objects and art. This area costs more, of course, and unlike the market, bargaining is not customary. The **Mamilla Mall** area between the Jaffa Gate and the New City, spanning the Valley of Gehinnom, has vastly expanded shopping options near the Old City—this is a very upscale locale. For more information on shopping options, search the Israel forum on Trip Advisor for “shopping,” and you will find whole threads of suggestions on that topic.



For the other days, possibilities include:

- You can also walk around and see some of the other gates into the Old City—there are seven altogether. The **Damascus Gate and the Lion's Gate** are the most elaborate and interesting. The **New Gate** is from 1889. That's Jerusalem!

- **The Mount of Olives.** This site will be of interest to both Christians and Jews. For Jews, it is the site of the massive **Jewish Cemetery**, with graves going back to Second Temple times, and even modern luminaries such as former Prime Minister Menachem Begin are buried there. For Christians, the Mount of Olives marks both the beginning of the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday as well as the site of his anguish, betrayal, and arrest following the Last Supper, and according to at least one Gospel, his subsequent ascension into heaven. A number of churches commemorate these events, but the main ones to see are **Dominus Flevit** (“the Lord wept”) higher on the hill and the **Church of All Nations at Gethsemane** farther down. The latter is a modern church, quite



spectacular, and the olive grove and quiet garden outside is the probable site of ancient Gethsemane, which means “place of the oil press” in Hebrew. It is one of the most peaceful, moving places in Israel for Christians, much more spiritually affecting for me than more famous sites such as the Holy Sepulcher. Just try to time your visit to miss the tour bus crowds! Finally, if you can get into the breathtaking **Russian Orthodox Church of Mary Magdalene**, that is a special treat, but its hours are quite limited, Tuesday and Thursday,

10:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. But check out the gorgeous, gilded onion domes on the bottom left of the previous page, which are perhaps the most stunning visual when looking at the Mount of Olives!

By the way, a great resource on Jerusalem's array of Christian churches is **Aviva Bar-Am's book, *Beyond the Walls: Churches of Jerusalem*** (Avha Press Jerusalem, 1998). She is a renowned travel writer and former correspondent for the *Jerusalem Post*. You can pick it up in Jerusalem or on [www.israel-catalog.com](http://www.israel-catalog.com), and used copies are available on [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com).

- **The City of David.** These excavations are found on the Ophel Ridge, which extends south from the current Temple Mount (ancient Mount Moriah) down into the present day Arab village of Silwan. This was the original Jerusalem, conquered by King David about the year 1000 B.C.E. to become the capital of his united kingdom. After David's death, of course, his son Solomon built the First Temple on Mount Moriah, on land which David had purchased. God denied David himself the privilege of building the Temple himself because he was a "man of blood" and had sinned through his adulterous affair with Bathsheba and the arranged killing of her husband Uriah. Recent excavations have exposed a nearly 4,000-year-old Canaanite tunnel that was used to bring water from the Gihon spring into the walled city; it was probably through this tunnel that David's men infiltrated to conquer the Jebusite city. Now you can walk all the way through it to the Pool of Siloam ("Shiloach," in Hebrew), and you can also walk (or wade, rather) through the tunnel dug by King Hezekiah centuries later to provide a constant source of water within the city walls in preparation for the anticipated Assyrian siege, a project recorded in the Bible. The City of David is an extraordinary site where biblical stories come alive, and it is indeed where it all began, as you will be constantly reminded. You should go with an individual or group tour; unless you know what you are doing, wandering around the modern-day village of Silwan could be unwise because of political tensions, and you won't know what you are looking at in any event. The City of David (Ir David) Foundation offers English-speaking tours, but you should know that this group has an intensely nationalistic agenda, with which you may or may not be comfortable. You can get more information about the Foundation and the tours that are offered from their website at [www.cityofdavid.org.il/ContactUs\\_eng.asp](http://www.cityofdavid.org.il/ContactUs_eng.asp) or call (02) 626-2341. The City of Jerusalem also offers tours on the weekends during part of the year, and other groups may offer tours paired with other sites, such as Mount Zion's sites. Any private guide can also take you through the City of David, however—you do not have to use Ir David.

By the way, while you are exploring the City of David, consider stopping at a lovely little shop called **Pool of Siloam Antiquities**, tel. (02) 656-3368, cell (052) 409-0413. Its owner **Abraham Siam** is an authorized deal in antiquities (and a great fellow). He offers a range of gifts for sale, including ancient coins with certificates of authenticity. His prices are fair and his work trustworthy. Since the true Pool of Siloam has been found in a new location further down, much of his business has dried up (pardon the pun) as the crowds go elsewhere, but he is really worth a visit. I bought my then ten-year-old nephew a coin from the reign of King Herod Agrippa (c. 42 C.E.), and this was a *big* hit!



- Interested in some hands-on archeology? You can visit the “rescue dig” at **Emek Tzurim** at the base of Mount Scopus near the “boundary” with the Mount of Olives, east of the Old City. Several years ago, the Waqf (the Islamic Trust which controls the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif) opened a new exit to the underground mosque on Temple Mount in the area (mis)called “Solomon’s Stables.” In doing so, the Waqf illegally excavated under Temple Mount and dumped some 80 truckloads of debris into the Kidron Valley. This was an archeological atrocity (and completely illegal), as archeologists can only date artifacts based on their location in layers of soil.



And this was from under the surface of Temple Mount, where archeological excavations are prohibited but land which contains, presumably, the remains of two Jewish Temples not to mention vital Crusader, Byzantine, and, yes, Muslim history! Anyway, the City of David Foundation is working on sifting through the dumped material to rescue what they can, and you can participate. Volunteers dump out buckets of debris onto a mesh grid, and sort through looking for items. In every bucket we searched, we found shards of pottery, bits of mosaic, bone, and ancient glass—and some volunteers have made important finds. It’s really quite fascinating, and would be a great activity for kids as well. You can reserve this through The City of David Foundation at \*6033 (free phone in Israel), or 972-2-626-2341 from abroad, or see this website for more information: [www.cityofdavid.org.il/en/tours/mount-olives/temple-mount-sifting-project](http://www.cityofdavid.org.il/en/tours/mount-olives/temple-mount-sifting-project). It is very inexpensive—₪20 for adults and ₪16 for children for up to an hour and a half. Staff from the dig will give you an introductory talk and oversee the work.

- The Rockefeller Museum** in East Jerusalem is a fascinating reminder of British rule under the mandate, and has as well a renowned collection of archeological artifacts. Now part of the Israel Museum, this museum was custodian of much of the Dead Sea Scrolls for a long time, and to me it feels like the “museum that time forgot,” with a decidedly 1930s British feel. It even has an old-fashioned card catalogue!



- Stroll the **Ben-Yehuda Street Mall** in the New City near downtown. The area offers lots of restaurants, shops, and people watching. You may see armed civil guards in the area; don’t worry unless the Israelis look worried. Other streets to walk around on include Yoel Salomon and Hillel Street, both off of Ben Yehuda. This is where the younger folks hang out, by the way, meaning I fit in less and less as the years go by. ☺ The **Harmony and Arthur Hotels** are located in this area, and it’s a 10-minute walk from the **YMCA or the King David, Eldan, or David Citadel Hotels**.
- If you want to delve more into Zionist history, **the Museum of Underground Prisoners** at the old Jerusalem Central Prison from the British Mandate period might be of interest. Here, prisoners from the pre-State undergrounds (Haganah, Etzel/Irgun, and Lehi/Stern Gang) were held, and the museum has very interesting tales to tell from the difficult and violent birth of Israel. The museum and prison are located at 1 Mishol Ha-G’vura Street, Russian Compound, tel. (02) 623-3166.
- The Tower of David Museum of the History of Jerusalem.** This is an excellent look at the extraordinary history of this city. It is in the (misnamed) Tower of

David just inside the Jaffa Gate. This really helps put what you will see or have seen of Jerusalem in historical context. The site is actually a citadel from Herodian times, still plenty old! But it is nowhere near David's city, which lies outside the present Old City walls. Still, it is one of the best museums in the city.

- **The Russian Compound.** In the 1800s, various European nations and Americans tried to gain significant holdings in Jerusalem—in fact, guide **Madeleine Lavine** (p. 52) offers a fascinating “Europe in Jerusalem” tour that explores this history. As part of that, you can tour the holdings of the Russian Orthodox Church along the **Street of the Prophets**. Some interesting sites along the way include **Bet Sergei**, the guesthouse for visiting Russian royalty (now housing the Ministry of Agriculture), and **Bet Ticho**, a museum housed in the home of two famous Jerusalemites, eye surgeon Avraham Ticho and his painter wife, Anna Ticho. **Bet Ticho has a delightful café called Anna** that alone makes it worth a stop (see p. 67), located at 9 Ha-Rav Kook Street, tel. (02) 624-5068 or 624-4186. Be sure to see as well the nearby, circular **Ethiopian Church** and tour it if you can with one of the gentle and kind priests who serve there. Built in 1893 by Emperor Johannes I, it is an island of peaceful reflection in this busy city. Be sure to notice the Lions of Judah on the lintel over the entrance—and remember that this community traces its origins to the union of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, as do the Ethiopian Jews.
- **Bethlehem**—only about 12 km south of Jerusalem, if you are so inclined. **Sam Salem** offers tours of Bethlehem, where he is from originally, and he can transport you there as well. His contact information is on **p. 53**. Bethlehem is under the control of the Palestinian Authority, and for that reason no Jewish Israeli tour guide or taxi driver will be able to get you all the way in. You can go in with an Arab taxi driver from the Old City, or take an Arab bus from the Damascus Gate area. If you take that route, you could also use a Palestinian guide in the city. While in the city, you can have lunch on Manger Square at the **Peace Center Restaurant**, across from the Church of the Nativity. The food is great, the bathrooms spotless, and the view of Manger Square is terrific—especially from the outside terrace area. Tel. (02) 275-8122 and (059) 518-7622. Another option that Sam can set you up with is the **Central Restaurant** operated by George Nassar, tel. (02) 274-4004 or (052) 548-4478. It is open for dinner or lunch by arrangement, and the food is incredible (and overwhelming)!
- Day trip to **Jericho and Hisham's Palace** (now under administration of the Palestinian Authority). You could go on your own via Arab drivers or taxis, but **Sam Salem** takes people there as well, and I have heard very good reports on his visits to those places. Jericho is the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world.
- **Herodian and Mar Saba.** Sam Salem took me to **Herodian**, Herod the Great's massive summer fortress south of Jerusalem and Bethlehem. Herod, the master builder, had this hill topped with an artificial, conical summit and a magnificent palace, and it made the small mountain look like a volcano, which it still does today. The national park there is quite impressive, and in 2007, Herod's tomb was found on the site! The tomb was relocated to the Israel Museum for an amazing exhibit on Herod; I hope it will be put on



permanent exhibition somewhere now that the exhibit has closed, but that's not yet clear. Afterwards, we visited **Mar Saba** (pictured previous page, bottom right), a Greek Orthodox monastery built into the cliffs of the Wadi Kidron. It is quiet, spectacular, and very peaceful. It is one of Sam's favorite places, and I encourage you to visit it with him.

- **Talpiot and the Hill of Evil Counsel.** This hillside south of Jerusalem was the seat of the British High Commissioner for Palestine during the Mandate period, and his spectacular headquarters, known as Government House, now serves as the United Nations headquarters for the entire Middle East. While that building is not open for public touring, the grounds, the promenade, and the overlook are, and offer breathtaking views of the entire city of Jerusalem. The terrifically evocative name listed above comes from the legend that Caiphas the High Priest had his home here, and that Judas plotted the betrayal of Jesus on this site (and that Jesus's first trial, at least according to some gospel accounts, was also here). This cannot be accurate historically, as the High Priest's home would never have been outside the city walls, but the name has stuck, at least in common Western or Christian usage. Jews usually just call the region Talpiot, and it is seen as a very desirable neighborhood. It's also a prime shopping district.
- For a Palestinian Arab perspective on the history of Jerusalem, I recommend **the Wujoud Cultural Center and Museum** on the left side David Street as you enter it from the Jaffa Gate. This organization is intended to support the lives and work of Palestinian women and also has a small museum dedicated to showing the life of Palestinian Jerusalemites in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries. It is located in a building six centuries old from the Mamluk era, and you must make reservations to visit, tel. (02) 626-0916; website [www.araborthodoxsociety.com](http://www.araborthodoxsociety.com); e-mail [aoswujoud@gmail.com](mailto:aoswujoud@gmail.com). The organization has a frankly one-sided, Palestinian perspective, and for what it is worth, I think this Greek Orthodox-sponsored institution downplays the role radical Islamist pressure plays in making the lives of Christians here hard. But it was still worth a stop to get a different view of this city, which I see as a complex—and beautiful—mosaic of communities and cultures.
- Want a break from all of the history and religion? Check out the **Jerusalem Bird Observatory**, a delightful island of protected nature near the Knesset. The programs for Israeli schoolchildren are extensive and fun to watch, and the managers are passionate about protecting the birds of this region as well as migratory birds. Tel. (02) 653-7374 or (052) 386-9488; [www.jbo.org.il](http://www.jbo.org.il); [jbo@inter.net.il](mailto:jbo@inter.net.il).
- For another break, tour the wine country of the Judean Hills, particularly with my favorite guide **Madeleine Lavine**. There are many wineries, but I most recommend **Ella Valley Vineyards** in the stunning Judean Hills—the scenery alone is worth the tour. But the wines here are excellent, and marketing manager **Nevet Nitsan** was delightful to meet. See [www.ellavalley.com](http://www.ellavalley.com) for more information. From the US, one can order their wine from importer Victor Koshner Wines in Hollywood, Florida; contact [Florence@victorwines.com](mailto:Florence@victorwines.com). The Ella (or Elah) Valley is where David made his stand against Goliath. By the way, not too far from there is **Bet Guvrin**, with its well-known **"Dig for a Day"** program. Whether or not that is your cup of tea, there are spectacular excavations and the amazing **Bell Caves**, where ancient miners would punch a hole

through hard crust and then excavate massive caves in the shape of bells from the softer, chalk-like rock beneath. If you haven't had too much wine, all of this is worth a stop!

- **Hebron**—one of Judaism's four holy cities, this ancient town is sacred to Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike as the burial place of the Biblical (and Qur'anic) patriarchs and matriarchs: Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, and Jacob, Rachel, and Leah. While Hebron is one of the largest Palestinian cities in what is now known as the West Bank (or Judea, to nationalist Israelis), there was a Jewish community here for centuries, most of whom were murdered or driven out in the Arab Revolt of 1929. Of course, in the 1948 War for Independence, this city fell under Jordanian control and it was barred to Jews altogether. With Israeli control since 1967, right-wing settlers set up settlements in downtown Hebron in the 1970s and later founded a nearby Jewish suburb called Kiryat Arba, reviving an ancient name. The result is a seething stew of religion and politics that has often exploded in violence. Until the last few years, I would have called it too tense to visit comfortably (Jewish settler groups offered tours in armored buses), but in on two recent trips, I went there with **Sam Salem** and really enjoyed the visit. But in recent months, Hebron has become a major locus of knifing attacks on Israelis—check on local conditions before going. As of this moment (May 2016), I'd probably pass, but conditions change constantly.

The **Cave of the Machpelah (or Cave of the Patriarchs)**, known to Muslims as **the Sanctuary of Abraham or the Ibrahimi Mosque**, is shared (uneasily) by Jews and Muslims on a rotational basis; this is the site of those sacred biblical tombs, revered by all three Abrahamic faiths. The building, pictured at right, is a Herodian structure from the Second Temple period, with echoes of the Temple's own architecture and design, making it interesting for another reason altogether. The cave was also the place where in 1994 Dr. Baruch Goldstein, an American-born physician and Israeli settler, brutally murdered 29 Palestinian Muslim men who were at prayer, nearly derailing the peace process and horrifying the world, including all decent Israelis. Like the Passover Massacre of 2002, where a Palestinian suicide-bomber murdered 30 members of Jewish families at a Passover Seder at the Park Hotel in Netanya, this horrible event stands as a symbol of how "religious" extremists will murder people and try to kill the very hope of peace in the name of their twisted, evil perversion of faith. This should be a site where all people who call Abraham their father can worship in peace. God willing, one day it will be. As noted above, Hebron has been a focal point of recent disturbances, so while I had been saying Hebron was now safe to visit, check with a guide before you go, and I do not recommend that you visit Hebron on your own—go with a guide or a tour. I suggest you avoid the right-wing Jewish settler tours from the Hebron community or the Palestinian "alternative" tours (such as Green Olive), both of which offer more political indoctrination than tours, in my view. Instead, I recommend **Sam Salem** who, while Palestinian, brings a balanced and respectful approach to the visit reflecting the perspectives of all three faith communities. There are Jewish guides who would also do a great job, with similar balance—check carefully if you want to avoid political lectures. Another great option is **Abraham Hostel's** dual perspective tours of Hebron, where you will hear from Palestinian and Jewish resident guides. See <http://abrahamtours.com>.





Under pressure from militant Jewish settlers and the IDF trying to keep peace between them and Palestinian militants, the shopkeepers and merchants of Hebron have suffered a great deal economically. Hebron is renowned particularly for its glass-making, and any guide can show you some good shopping options. But I really loved one that **Sam Salem** took me to: **Abed's Shop**, also known as **The Checkpoint Shop**, so nicknamed for its proximity to an IDF checkpoint on Shahada Street, which separates Jewish settlers returning from worship at the Machpelah from the Palestinian vendors on the Arab main street. Abed Elmuhtaseb owns the last Palestinian shop to stay open on this street; if he closes (and he was offered a rumored million dollars to sell out), the street will likely be closed to Palestinians altogether. It is easily found opposite the Gutnick Centre in the square just down the hill from the Ibrahimi Mosque (close to the Tomb of the Patriarchs), and is only meters from the checkpoint; locals actually call it "Abed's Checkpoint" because it's so close. Abed and his son Mohammed (who speaks *excellent* English) sell good quality glass, embroidery, pottery, and (very) cold drinks. Sitting outside on plastic chairs enjoying Abed's mint-tea (and jokes) is perhaps the best people watching spot in Hebron. Also note that Abed's wife occasionally cooks makloubeh for guests, and **Sam Salem** can arrange this. Each person can pay about ₪50-60 for a meal. Abed's cell phone is (059) 923-2785. We purchased some lovely vases and decorative tile work, the prices were reasonable with a great selection, and they ship. Expect to bargain. Please stop in and spend some time and money. You'll get some memorable keepsakes, and these folks will get business they very much need to survive—they depend on internationals. Look, this is not about taking sides in the complex religious and political conflicts that tear at this holy but divided city. Both sides have made terrible blunders here, and many who live here have suffered terribly. There is grief and blame enough to go around. It is about helping good people who are caught in the metaphorical crossfire.



Finally, as always, I have some restaurant recommendations in Jerusalem. The restaurant scene in Jerusalem is a far cry from my unremarkable experiences in early visits—one can eat *very* well indeed in this city now!


- One of the loveliest, hideaway cafés and bookstores in the city is **Tmol Shilshom** at 5 Yoel Solomon Street, in the courtyard upstairs behind this address, tel. (02) 623-2758, [www.tmol-shilshom.co.il](http://www.tmol-shilshom.co.il), e-mail at [info@tmol-shilshom.co.il](mailto:info@tmol-shilshom.co.il). It is a gathering place for Jerusalemites of all kinds—it is both a popular gathering place for gay people, and a favored first-date site for Orthodox Jewish couples! That kind of diversity in Jerusalem is sadly rare. The bookstore used to have bookmarks from all over the world pinned up on the wall. In a late 1990s visit, I was stunned to notice a bookmark from a local bookstore in Cincinnati pinned right over my husband's head! There are also readings, concerts, and other events here, and you can check on what is happening during your visit at the web site above. The restaurant is kosher, the food is excellent, and the atmosphere unique. It is one of my favorite restaurants in the city. Say "shalom" to owner **David Ehrlich** for me!
- A terrific and innovate upscale choice is **Eucalyptus** at 14 Hativat Yirushalayim, tel. (02) 624-4331, [www.the-eucalyptus.com/welcome](http://www.the-eucalyptus.com/welcome), e-mail [info@the-eucalyptus.com](mailto:info@the-eucalyptus.com). Under the stewardship of renowned Israeli chef-owner **Moshe Basson**, the restaurant features ingredients from the Land of Israel, often from the



biblical era, prepared in fresh and inspired ways. The atmosphere is fun and festive, and the food impeccable. Some orders may result in a big show coming out of the kitchen! And just so you know, the tasting menu is wonderful—but huge! If you go that route, get the smallest one. This is my current favorite for an upscale night out—it is a special place for a special meal (we celebrated my friend Gina’s birthday there on my 2012 trip). Be sure to take the address and phone number with you, and tell the taxi driver that the restaurant is below Jaffa Gate in the Artists’ Quarter, a development of shops and apartments—it can be tricky to find. Eucalyptus is kosher and, of course, closed on Friday evening.

- The **Archibald Harte YMCA International Restaurant** at 26 King David Street is back to being a contender, with good food and drink with excellent service at a reasonable price, and the seating on the terrace across from the King David Hotel, with its views of the gorgeous YMCA Tower and palm trees swaying in the breeze—well, it makes my heart full to bursting just to think about it. Tel. (02) 569-2692; not kosher.
- Another great place close to the YMCA and King David Hotel is **the Olive and Fish**, a kosher fish and meat restaurant at 2 Jabotinsky Street not far off King David Street, tel. (02) 566-5020, [oliveandfish@gmail.com](mailto:oliveandfish@gmail.com). It offers tasty food at reasonable prices, and is very popular.
- **Menza** at 10 Betsalel Street, tel. (02) 625-5222. It’s a simple place, popular with locals and definitely off the beaten path, and the food was very good. The wine list was skimpy on local Israeli wines, not a positive in my book, but the cocktails were good, and the food and service were quite good, with reasonable prices. A solid if not special choice.
- Looking for coffee? Coffee shops have sprung up everywhere in Israel it seems, and my favorite chain is **Café Aroma**, found nearly everywhere but including in the Ben Yehuda District. I am pleased to say that Starbucks failed in Israel—give an Israeli shop a try, and enjoy some fine coffee with your wi-fi or book!
- **Piccolino** is located in the Ben-Yehuda district at 12 Yoel Moshe Salomon Street, tel. (02) 624-4186; e-mail at [nava@piccolino.co.il](mailto:nava@piccolino.co.il); [www.piccolino.co.il](http://www.piccolino.co.il). It is a kosher fish and dairy restaurant, and the dishes were excellent. I recommend it.
- There are dozens of wonderful places to eat in Jerusalem’s amazing **Mehane Yehuda** market, an open air collection of stalls selling everything imaginable and giving visitors a real flavor of Israeli life. There are cafés, restaurants, pizza, hummus, and falafel stalls, and great wine shops. But a recent innovation is a very fun experience, what is being called **After Market** on Saturday evenings after the end of Shabbat, when many restaurants and bars in the market open for late night partying crowds. We discovered this as the guest of Trip Advisor Destination Expert Amos R., and what a delightful time!
- The German Colony area of Jerusalem, not far south of the King David Street area with its many hotels, is a delightful neighborhood to explore. There are quite a few restaurants in that area. But the best bet in that area is Jerusalem’s **First Station**, a whole complex of new shops, galleries, restaurants, and entertainment venues built around the old Ottoman-era train station. It’s amazing—and really shatters Jerusalem’s old image as Tel

Aviv's dowdy older sister! On two recent visits, I ate at **Ha-Sadna, the Culinary Workshop**, located at 28 Hebron Road, tel. (02) 567-2265; [www.hasadna.rest-e.co.il](http://www.hasadna.rest-e.co.il). I loved this place—felt like a funky, New York eatery! Brett really enjoyed it as well, though—as is common at fun, funky places—the music was a tad loud for our tastes.

- **Te'enim (Figs)** in the Zionist Confederation House behind the King David is an inexpensive, charming vegetarian place, small with a spectacular view of the Old City, particularly when the walls are floodlit at night. It is located at 12 Emile Botta Street (well back from the street down a path), Yemin Moshe, Tel. (02) 625-1967, [www.rest.co.il/teenim](http://www.rest.co.il/teenim) (Hebrew site, with English icon). We had a Trip Advisor dinner in a private room there and were not disappointed. If Patrick is there that night, tell him—you guessed it!—"shalom" for me. As a vegetarian place, Te'enim is kosher. Look for the sign off on the right side of Emile Botta as you face the Old City walls, and then follow the path; the sign is small and easy to miss.
  - I mentioned **Bet Ticho** in the touring section, but I have to mention a new dining option, **the Anna Restaurant at Bet Ticho**, which offers terrific food at a reasonable price in a lovely, art gallery setting. The restaurant has been moved upstairs (I'll miss the outdoor setting of its predecessor), and it is located at 9 Ha-Rav Kook Street off of the Street of the Prophets, tel. (02) 624-4186, [www.go-out.com/ticho](http://www.go-out.com/ticho), e-mail at [beitticho@walla.com](mailto:beitticho@walla.com). It just reopened to good reviews after a renovation, and I hope to try it again on my next visit.
- 
- A beautiful rooftop restaurant with stunning views of the Old City can be found at the **Notre Dame of Jerusalem Center's Wine & Cheese Restaurant**. This is far more than a wine and cheese place; the menu is extensive. This Vatican-owned restaurant is open daily, including Shabbat, and of course is not kosher. I really enjoyed my meal there on my last trip. Tel. (02) 627-9177; [www.notredamecenter.org](http://www.notredamecenter.org).
  - If you are interested in experiencing North African cuisine, you might try **Darna**, a well-known (and fairly expensive) Moroccan restaurant. Darna is located at 3 Horkanos Street, tel. (02) 624-5406, e-mail: [il@darna.co.il](mailto:il@darna.co.il); see website at [www.darna.co.il](http://www.darna.co.il).
  - Want to try the best hummus and falafel in the Old City? Just asking this question will set off a war, but I will assert author's privilege and tell you to go to **Lina's Restaurant** in the Christian Quarter, 42 Christian Quarter Road near the intersection with Via Dolorosa, tel. (02) 627-7320. Many swear by Abu Shukri, and the food is indeed good, but I found the service indifferent and even unfriendly (maybe to non-Palestinians?). Lina's is great, they smile at you, and Madeleine the guide loves it, which seals the deal for me. We bought lunch there and took it to have lunch at the **Josef Natsheh Emporium**—a perfect combination! Ask Yousef when you stop by; maybe he will let you do the same. You buy lunch; he'll give you some coffee or mint tea. But get your hummus fix *here!*

- **My Favorite Place in the Old City.**

I have given you a lot of options, but I end with a **true favorite**. You will be walking a lot in the Old City, and there are a hundred places to stop for a drink and a bite to eat within those walls. **But above them all, I recommend an Armenian restaurant and lounge called Bulghourji** at 6 Armenian Patriarchate Road, tel. (02) 628-2072 or (052) 628-2080, <http://bulghourji.rest-e.co.il>, e-mail [bulghourji@hotmail.com](mailto:bulghourji@hotmail.com). After you come in the Jaffa Gate, turn right past the Tower of David and the post office and police station, and continue down the Armenian Patriarchate Road. You will pass the Armenian Tavern on your left (also reputed to be a good place, but this is not where I am sending you). This place is a little further on the right, with yellow shutters. The owner **Naro** is such a wonderful man; a lot of Jerusalemites just call it “Naro’s Place.” You will see he runs a great restaurant, and the staff is terrific as well. So go! Have a sandwich, some hummus with fresh pita to die for, or a delicious Armenian pizza. Drink some Taybeh (Palestinian) beer, wine, or refreshing lemonade with mint. Want a real kick? Try some arak, the Middle Eastern, anise-based liquor that is like Greek ouzo. Naro has a lovely, open courtyard in back and has opened a “VIP club” (lounge) downstairs. In a city full of great restaurants, I always eat there more than once, and that tells you something about the lovely, warm atmosphere Naro has created. And the bathrooms are sparkling clean, some of the best in the Old City! That is an unbeatable combo.



That wraps up my personal guide. I do hope that you found it helpful. Now that you have read it, I would be happy to try to answer any other questions you may have. Happy and safe travels to you, or as Israelis would say, “nesiya tova!” (Bon voyage!)

Douglas E. Duckett  
Cincinnati, Ohio, USA  
[Labatt@fuse.net](mailto:Labatt@fuse.net)