

# Tourism

2012

- » Onward to the five million mark
- » Cruising the Mediterranean
- » Making business a pleasure



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# Onward

## to the five million mark

By John Benzaquen II

Stas Misezhnikov is Israel's tourism minister. When he took over the Tourism Ministry nearly four years ago, the tourist industry was going through a difficult period. Incoming tourism amounted to an annual 2.7 million, and there were fears that the numbers would stagnate. But this has not happened.

In 2011, incoming tourism reached 3.5 million, and this year it is expected to rise by a few more percentage points.

But despite the rise in tourism in the past few years and the expected rise in the future, incoming tourism has not changed a lot and is continuing on the well-trod grid of religiously oriented tourism.

In a talk we had several years ago when Misezhnikov was chairman of the Knesset Finance Committee, we discussed the state of the Israeli economy and the issue of incoming tourism. He said that more emphasis should be placed on SSS tourism – sun, sea and sand. But today, the emphasis is still on religion.

"The emphasis is still on religion," Misezhnikov explains, "because we have a distinct advantage. We have the uniqueness of the holy land. Israel is the land of the Bible. We have the major holy sites of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. These do not exist anywhere else in the world, and it would be foolish not to take advantage of that. Consequently, in our marketing campaigns, we put an emphasis on the religious element," he says.

"Nevertheless," he continues, "we conduct a very varied campaign. Besides emphasizing the religious aspect, we also highlight the fact that we are a holiday recreational destination with sun and surf. But in this particular aspect, we compete with other countries in the region such as Greece Turkey, Egypt and Jordan," he says.

"However, when promoting the Western Wall or the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, we have no competitors. And we promote it in such a way as to combine it with history and culture. The people who come to visit these sites are not all religiously inclined, they are not all pilgrims. Many are vacationing tourists and, as such, we promote these sites in the same way the UK promotes the Tower of London, Spain the Alhambra, Greece the Acropolis and Italy the Coliseum," he says.

"But," he continues, "we do not neglect our other attractions. Despite the SSS competition from Sharm el Sheikh in Egypt and Aqaba in Jordan, I decided to invest heavily in promoting Eilat as a holiday and vacation destination. In 2011, over one million tourists visited Eilat. Hotel capacity was 70 percent, and this is due in no small part to the resources we are devoting to promote this Red Sea resort city," says Misezhnikov.

**The latest figures published by Israel's Central Statistics Bureau show that incoming tourism is growing. Is this trend sustainable, given the**

### continuing global economic crisis and the instability in neighboring countries?

Despite the global economic downturn that is also affecting Israel, we have managed to maintain a constant rise in the number of incoming tourists. Despite the unrest in neighboring countries and the decline in tourism to the other countries in the region, we have achieved record numbers of incoming tourists.

It has not been easy. We have increased market activities in countries less affected by the economic downturn such as India, the Russian Federation, Ukraine and other Eastern and Central European countries. We have also strengthened our relations with retail tourist operators. These policies have been successful, and we hope they will allow us to continue to increase incoming tourism.

### According to the Tourism Ministry's master plan, by 2015 we will have reached 15 million incoming tourist, a 40% rise from the expected 3.5 million plus in 2012 and an annual rise of 12%. Is that a realistic assessment?



Stas Misezhnikov with his Bulgarian colleague Delyan Dobrev (Photo by Yossi Zamir)



Stas Misezhnikov

The emphasis is still on religion because we have a distinct advantage. We have the uniqueness of the holy land. Israel is the land of the Bible. We have the major holy sites of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. These do not exist anywhere else in the world, and it would be foolish not to take advantage of that,

Up to the onset of the global economic downturn, this was a feasible assessment. You have to take into account that Greece experienced a drop of 11% in incoming tourism in the first half of 2012, while the corresponding numbers in Israel have risen slightly. We are optimistic and believe that the five million mark is just a matter of time.

To reach that mark, we need an extra 19,000 hotel rooms. In 2011 we authorized grants of NIS 204 million to build additional hotel rooms, and this year we are authorizing a similar amount. In addition, we have authorized grants of NIS 450 million to build additional hotel rooms and attractions in the Dead Sea area.

A rise in tourism is very good news for the local economy and for Israel in general. A satisfied, happy tourist is good public relations.

It also has a very salutary effect on the economy. In 2011 the income from tourism amounted to NIS 33 billion (approximately \$9.5 billion). The number of people employed in tourism in 2011 amounted to 160,000, an increase of over 10% since 2009.

The tourist industry is a very important employer. It has its high paid top executives with their MBAs and other university degrees. But it is one of the few industries in Israel that can provide employment to unskilled labor. Israel is a very advanced technological society. Most of the labor needs of the economy are for the skilled. But not all the seven million plus Israelis are skilled. A large tourist sector can provide employment to unskilled labor and, in so doing, resolve some pressing social problems.

We believe that by making use of existing facilities, namely enlarging existing hotels, it will be possible to build an additional 10,000 hotel rooms quickly. We are fully aware of the changes taking place in the global tourist industry. The advent of new low-cost airline carriers has introduced a new breed of tourists. They require modest hotels, and we intend to supply their needs.

### Elections are in the air. In a few months we may have a new tourism minister. If so, how would you sum up your tenure as minister of tourism? What were your most important achievements? And if you were to continue for another four years, what would you want to accomplish?

In my opinion, elections are not just around the corner, and I have many more months as minister of tourism. But during the past three years plus, our most important achievement was enhancing the awareness of the importance of tourism as a means to achieve economic growth.

Another important achievement was increasing incoming tourism during the past two years despite the strong headwinds – global economic recession, the Arab Spring, which has caused turmoil in the region, etc.

We have also succeeded in turning Tel Aviv into a major global tourist destination. We have also developed new tourist destinations, such as wine tourism and ethnic tourism with the Druse, Circassian and Arab communities.

X

# Have you been to Avdat?

By John Benzaquen II

Photos by Doron Nissim, Nature and Park Authority II

» How many New Yorkers have visited the Empire State Building or how many Romans have actually visited the Coliseum? Not many.

For them, these landmarks are part of their ordinary lives, and very few take the time to visit them as tourists.

The same holds true of Israel. Our country is filled with historical sites and monuments, yet few Israelis take the time to visit them.

Israel is a small country, thus most major sites are not very far from the centers of population. So set some time aside to see some of the many historical sites in Israel, such as the ruins of the Nabatean city of Avdat in the Negev or the remains of the old Israelite city of Tel Arad with its temple and holy of holies modeled after the First Temple in Jerusalem.

Other places of interest are the Crusader fortress of Belvoir overlooking the Jordan Valley; the fortress of Nimrod built to block the expansion of the Crusader kingdom; and Beit She'an, Israel's Pompeii. All these places are not difficult to reach and are well worth a visit.

The following sites have been declared national parks and are maintained by the Israel Nature and National Parks Protection Authority. The opening hours are from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.

## Tel Arad, a glimpse of what the First Temple looked like

Tel Arad is a 10- to 15-minute drive from the modern city of Arad, which is named after its urban predecessor. This is the very well-preserved site of a city that was inhabited by the Canaanites more than 5,000 years ago. The city was founded circa 3150 BCE and was inhabited by the Canaanites until 2200 BCE, when it was occupied by the Israelites.

It was one of the most important urban centers in Canaan, as evidenced by its long walls, well-planned streets, water collecting methods, etc. The city was divided into a lower and an upper city. The lower city was abandoned during the Israelite period. At that period, the urban hub was centered in the upper city, with its castle and temple. During the Israelite period, the city of Arad was much smaller than it was during the Canaanite period. Nevertheless, it was a major strong point, a well-fortified city of the Israelite

and Judean kingdom.

In the courtyard of the castle is a temple modeled on the Solomonic Temple in Jerusalem. In those times, there were such temples all over the country, and each one had its holy of holies. Some religious Jews do not enter the temple for fear of treading on and desecrating sacred soil.

**How to get there:** Drive to the Tel Aviv-Beersheba highway (Route 40), turn left at the Lahavim Junction and onto the road to Arad. At the Shoket Junction, turn north and drive for another two kilometers.

**Recommended length of visit:** One and a half hours.

**Admission:** Adults NIS 12; children NIS 6. Groups: NIS 11 per adult; NIS 5 per child.



The walls of  
Old Arad

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### Tel Afek, the citadel that David built

When King David defeated the Philistines in Afek in the 11th century BCE, he had a citadel built on the site. It commanded an important part of the Via Maris, the ancient main route from Egypt to Damascus. After the destruction of the First Temple, the citadel was abandoned.

Much later, the city was rebuilt by Herod and named Antipatris. The remains of this city are on view, as well as the remains of a fine Turkish fortress called Biner Bashi. This fortress had a view of the surrounding area and commanded the source of the Yarkon River. The headwaters of the Yarkon are now used for irrigation, but 50 years ago it was the main source of fresh water for that rich agricultural region.

**How to get there:** It is located near the end of the road from Petah Tikvah to Rosh Ha'ayin.

**Recommended length of visit:** Two hours

**Admission:** Adults NIS 23; children NIS 12. Groups: NIS 19 per adult; NIS 11 per child.



✓ Tel Afek



✓ The Herodion

### Herodion, the palace fortress that Herod built

Herodion is one of the most fascinating structures of the ancient world in existence. It combined the functions of a palace and a fortress. Built by King Herod just outside Bethlehem, it is an artificial hill with massive walls around it, with Herod's palace at the center. It had large public rooms, private rooms, bathrooms, etc.

Outside the walls were lush gardens and a swimming pool. Since the area around Herodion is arid, water was brought in via pipes and over an aqueduct.

This structure, started in 22 BCE, took seven years to build. According to legend, Herod intended it as his burial ground.

**How to get there:** From Jerusalem's Gilo Junction, take Highway No. 356 past Har Homa and the settlements of Nokdim and Tekoa and from there to Herodion.

**Recommended length of visit:** Up to two hours.

**Admission:** Adults NIS 23; children NIS 12. Groups: NIS 19 per adult; NIS 11 per child.

### Beit She'an, the local Pompeii >>>

Well, not exactly Pompeii, since the city was not destroyed by a volcanic eruption but an earthquake. However, it is very well preserved.

Like Megiddo, Beit She'an was a center of Egyptian rule in the area. Its importance was in its strategic location overlooking the Jordan Valley and the rich agricultural land around it.

But the fame of Beit She'an is due to its Hellenistic heritage. After the conquests of Alexander the Great, the area around Beit She'an was resettled by Greeks, who founded a city state and called it Scythopolis-Nysa. The city flourished and later was part of the confederation called

the Decapolis, a grouping of 10 Hellenistic city-states in the region.

The remains of the city attest to its former glory. Temples, an amphitheater, bath houses and luxurious dwellings are evidence of one of the great cities of the Ancient Middle East.

**How to get there:** Drive to the city of Beit She'an.

**Recommended length of visit:** At least half a day.

**Admission:** Adults NIS 23; children NIS 12. Groups: NIS 19 per adult; NIS 11 per child.



✓ Ruins of ancient Beit She'an



✓ Ruins of ancient Beit She'an



# The Herzl Museum

The Herzl Museum, built by the World Zionist Organization, is located at the entrance to Mount Herzl in Jerusalem.

The site of Israel's National Memorial Hall. The museum presents a fascinating audio-visual show where the visitor can meet the man who envisioned the future Jewish state more than 100 years ago. The 60-minute show provides a thoughtprovoking and inspirational insight onto the Jewish nation as seen by Benjamin Zeev Herzl. The museum exposes the visitor to key historical events, to Herzl's bold ambitions, and to his stormy personal journey.

The visit can be conducted in Hebrew, English, Russian, French, Spanish, German, and Amharic, and is suited for families.

**Entry by prior arrangement only.**



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## The Nabatean cities of the Negev

The Nabatean city of Petra in Jordan is internationally renowned. The three lesser-known Nabatean cities within Israel are Avdat, Mamshit and Shivta.

### Avdat, watchdog of the Spice Route

Avdat is the largest Nabatean city in Israel. It is located on the Spice Route, the route taken by the caravans of the ancients to transport spices and essence collected from Arabia at the commercial entrepot of Petra to the port of Gaza for export to Greece, Rome and Egypt. Such a rich and important commercial city had to be well defended. Its acropolis on the hills above the city is proof of its strategic importance and its attraction to predators, mainly Beduin.

The city had many ups and downs, which is reflected in its architecture. Its prosperity was founded on the transfer of goods from Arabia to Gaza and vice versa. When Gaza fell to the Hasmonean Alexander Janneus, trade decreased dramatically. But it received a big influx of refugees from Gaza and began to recover.

The city itself survived the fall of the Nabatean Kingdom when it was captured by the Romans. It remained a major desert urban center until it was captured and destroyed by the Arabs.

Not much is left of the town itself, although the remains of the Nabatean temple and houses and public buildings are proof of its past power and prosperity. The best-preserved part of Avdat is the acropolis, or castle, 650 meters above sea level, with spectacular views all around.

The Nabateans were experts in growing food in the desert. Adjacent to the site is a large farm that uses Nabatean agricultural techniques of irrigation sowing and reaping to this day, with very successful yields.

At the visitors' center, the city and the Spice Route are brought to life. There is also a shop that sells snacks and souvenirs.

**How to get there:** Drive to the Beersheba-Mizpe Ramon road (Route 40), some 10 kilometers past Kibbutz Sde Boker, and turn left. The site is on a prominent hilltop.

Recommended length of visit 2 hours.

**Admission:** Adults NIS 23; children NIS 12. Groups: NIS 19 per adult; NIS 11 per child.



The walls of Old Avdat

### Mamshit, the birthplace of the Arab horse

The Nabatean city of Mamshit (Memphis in English) is the smallest but best-preserved Nabatean city in the Negev. Like Avdat, it was an important trading center and sat on the trade route from Arabia and the Idumean Mountains to Hebron and onwards to Jerusalem, Samaria and Damascus.

Despite the fact that trade waned after the Roman conquest of Nabatea, Mamshit prospered due to the breeding of horses. The world-famous Arabian strain were first raised in Mamshit. Later, its prosperity was based on its location as a frontier town of the Byzantine Empire. But when the influence and power of Byzantium declined and funding ran out, the city quickly declined and was abandoned.

**How to get there:** Drive along the Beersheba-Dimona road (Route 25). Drive eight kilometers in the direction of the Rotem Industrial Park and turn right just before reaching the junction.

Recommended length of visit: Two hours.

**Admission:** Adults NIS 12; children NIS 6. Groups: NIS 11 per adult; NIS 5 per child.

### Shivta, growing food in the desert

The Nabatean city of Shivta differs from other Nabatean towns in that it was not a commercial center, did not lie astride a trade route, and it was not fortified. Archeologists believe it was agricultural in nature, with fields all around it.

This is surprising, since it is located in one of the driest areas of the Negev Desert.

But the Nabateans were experts in desert agriculture, and the town is a model of careful town planning, with well-designed streets and water recovery systems.

**How to get there:** Go to the Beersheba-Mizpe Ramon highway (Route 40) and continue to the Telafim Junction, Route 211. At the junction near the gas station, turn south and drive for another 10 kilometers.

Recommended length of visit: One hour.

Admission: None.



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Orthodox synagogue in Presov, Slovakia (Photo by Ruth Ellen Grubey)

# Echoes of the Jewish spirit



By Ruth Beloff II

» No matter how far and wide we travel, visiting well-trod or more exotic places, it is always gratifying to find sites or enclaves that are connected to our Jewish heritage. Amid the myriad of magnificent churches and imposing statues and structures around the world, the sight of a synagogue, a Judaica museum or a Magen David on an old dwelling evokes a sense of pride and a warm feeling of familiarity.

Spain, for example, is filled with testaments to Jewish life past and present. In Madrid there are several shuls, such as the Orthodox Sephardi synagogues Beth Yaacov and Jasdei Lea.

In historic Toledo, which had one of the largest Jewish populations in Spain, before the expulsion of the Jews in 1492, the Jewish quarter is a significant place to visit. The Synagogue of El Transito was built in 1336, and then converted to a church after the expulsion. The building now houses the Sephardi Museum.

On the outskirts of Toledo, a former synagogue now called Santa María la Blanca is also a museum. Erected in 1180, it is considered the oldest standing synagogue structure in Europe. It is owned and preserved by the Catholic Church, but no major changes were made to the building.

In Cordoba, the Jewish quarter is one of the most famous in Spain. The city boasts the only 14<sup>th</sup>-century synagogue in Andalusia and the only synagogue in Spain that was never turned into a Christian building. Another significant site in the quarter is a monument dedicated to Maimonides.

Barcelona had a rich Jewish culture during Spain's golden age. One of the main attractions that remain is the ancient ghetto and the fifth-century Main Synagogue of Barcelona. Today, only its subterranean level is open to visitors.

Italy, too, has a wealth of Jewish sites. In Rome there are 13 synagogues, mostly Sephardic.





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✓ Monument dedicated to Maimonides in Cordoba, Spain (Photo: Turismo de Cordoba)



The synagogue of Ostia Antica, the ancient seaport near Rome, is one of the oldest in the world. The remains of a 4th-century synagogue constructed on the site of a synagogue from the 1st century BCE were discovered there.

Another interesting shul, the Synagogue of Rome, Longotevere Cenci (1874-1904) has a unique Persian and Babylonian design. The museum in the synagogue chronicles the history of Rome's Jews.

An important relic in Rome is the Arch of Titus, opposite the Roman Forum. Built by the Roman commander to commemorate his victory over Judea in 70 CE, it depicts a parade of Romans carrying vessels from the Temple in Jerusalem.

Venice is the only Italian city that has a Jewish ghetto which has remained intact. It includes five synagogues, a Jewish bookstore, publishing house, social center, rest home, Jewish museum, yeshiva, and kosher grocery store and restaurant. The oldest synagogue in the ghetto, the Tedesca, (1528), contains the Museum of Hebrew Art.

In Florence, the Synagogue of Florence (1882), regarded as one of Europe's finest examples of blending Moorish style with Arabic and Byzantine elements, is considered one of the most beautiful buildings of 19th-century Italy. The interior features massive walnut doors, a central dome, wood and bronze carvings, marble floors, mosaics and tall stained glass windows.

Adjacent to the synagogue is a building that houses the Florence Jewish Museum, which provides a history of the city's Jewish community from 1437 to the present.

In another part of Europe, The Czech Republic offers some diverse places of Jewish interest, such as the Jewish Museum of Prague. The city's Jewish community town hall is also well worth a visit. And there is a clock with Hebrew letters that goes counter clockwise.

The 13<sup>th</sup>-century Alt Neu Shul, or The Old New Synagogue, is the oldest functioning synagogue in Europe and perhaps the world. It serves as Prague's main synagogue, with prayer services, weddings and bar/bat mitzva celebrations.

In neighboring Slovakia, there are many sites that attest to the Jewish community life that once flourished there. Those sites now form the Slovak

Jewish Heritage Route. Comprised of synagogues, cemeteries, monuments and museums, the route has 24 officially demarcated sites across the country.

In the capital, Bratislava, places of Jewish interest include the Museum of Jewish Culture; the Chatam Sofer Memorial; the Holocaust Memorial; and the Heydukova Street Synagogue. Built in the 1920s, this Orthodox synagogue is the only remaining shul in Bratislava that still functions as a house of worship.

While many synagogue structures in Slovakia still stand, very few are used for religious purposes, as very few Jews remain. However, as landmark buildings, many retain their Jewish façades, architectural design and intricate interior ornamentation. Many are used by the state as art galleries, museums, cultural centers or schools.

One of the most impressive functioning shuls in Slovakia is the Orthodox synagogue in Presov, the third-largest city in Slovakia after Bratislava and Kosice. Built in 1898, the three-story Moorish-style edifice was restored in the 1990s, its imposing architectural design enhanced by splendid ornamentation. The immense synagogue contains the Barkany Collection, an exhibition of Judaica gathered from the large Jewish community in the 1920s.

Synagogues on the route that are used for cultural purposes include the Art Nouveau synagogues in Trenchin and Nitra; the Orthodox synagogue in Zilina; the synagogue in Liptovsky Mikulas; the Moorish synagogues in Senec and Samorin; the nine-bay synagogue in Stupava; and the Status Quo synagogue in Trnava, which houses the Jan Koniarek contemporary art gallery and concert hall. Across the street from the Status Quo is the Max Gallery. An Orthodox synagogue renovated as a contemporary art gallery and concert venue, it won an award for the best restored religious building in Slovakia.

The route also includes the Park of Generous Souls in Zvolen, dedicated to the Slovak citizens who helped save Jews during the Holocaust. Its two outstanding features are the Threshold of Life and the Obelisk of Hope.



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# Making business a pleasure

By John Benzaquen II

» Israel is one of the most interesting tourist destinations. It is holy to the three greatest monotheistic religions in the world – Christianity, Judaism and Islam. Consequently, it has sites of great religious significance that are unique. The Church of the Holy Sepulcher for Christians, the Western Wall for Jews and Haram al Sharif for Muslims are all located in Jerusalem.

While much has been written about Israel as a tourist destination in terms of its historic sites, its scenery, its architecture and entertainment centers, less has been written about its importance to the local economy in terms of business tourism.

In 2011 Israel hosted approximately three and a half million tourists, the highest number of tourists ever to grace Israel's shores in a single year. Up to 2007, the number had amounted to two million.

The sharp rise in tourism started in 2001. During that year, incoming tourism reached 2.1 million, a rise of 24 percent compared to 1.7 million in 2006. The 3.5 million in 2011 meant a rise of 106% compared to five years ago. In the next five years, the number of tourists is expected to reach five million.

During the past five years, the number of incoming tourists has not only increased, but there has been a big change in where the visitors come from. Up to the first half the first decade of the 21st century, most of the tourists came from North America and Western Europe.

In 2011, Russia accounted for the second-largest number of tourists after the US – more than half a million. The numbers are rising fast, especially in what is called one-day tourism. Tourism from Poland and Ukraine is also rising fast. Most of them come to Israel

to see the Christian sites.

Religion is a very important factor on the tourism scene in Israel, but if we want to reach the five million mark, we must develop other attractions to widen the country's appeal. Israel must attract business travelers as well as those tourists who are looking for a good time and the famous three S's – sea, sand and sun.

Tourism as an industry is big business. In Israel in 2011, tourism generated more than NIS 60 billion, which equals some \$17 billion or around 6.5% of GDP. The income derived from direct services to incoming tourists – hotels, tours, etc. – amounted to NIS 21 billion, or \$5.8 billion. Tourist services to Israelis taking a holiday in their own country brought an additional NIS 14 billion, or \$4 billion plus. The balance of around NIS 25 billion is accounted for by ancillary services that are not purely tourist services because they are used by the population as a whole. These include restaurants, coffee shops and pubs, taxis, gift shops, jewelers, fashion houses, etc.



✓ Western Wall In Jerusalem (Photo courtesy of [www.goisrael.com](http://www.goisrael.com))





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In 2010, the tourist industry as measured by income grew by more than 16% and accounted for 15% of the total growth of the economy. In 2011 the number of jobs necessary to cater to the needs of incoming tourists amounted to nearly 200,000, or 6.2% of the county's workforce.

One of the advantages of tourism as a means of employment is that it has a very wide range of job opportunities. These extend from high-paying executive managerial jobs to those of a menial nature.

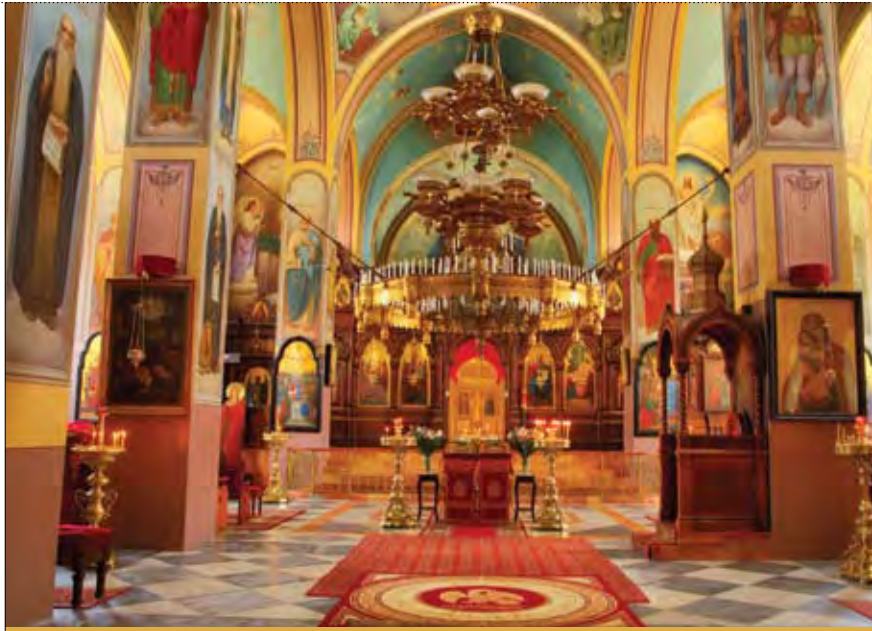
### Business tourism

Business tourism is very important to the Israeli economy in general and to the tourist industry in particular. In 2011, tourists coming to Israel to do business amounted to about half a million, or about 15% of the total number of incoming tourists. Israel is an important global hi-tech center; consequently, many hi-tech executives are frequent visitors.

Jimmy Zohar, general manager of the Carlton Hotel, one of Israel's leading business hotels, says, "Business tourists have a different agenda than other types of tourists. For one thing, their time is very limited. These are highly paid executives, and their employees want them back at their desks as soon as possible. Consequently, the tourist services, especially accommodation, should be adapted accordingly."

Furthermore, he adds, "Business tourism is much more stable.

Tourism is a relatively volatile industry, especially for Israel. Tourism can be equated with holiday. People who take



✓ Holy Trinity Church In Jerusalem (Photo courtesy of www.goisrael.com)

a vacation want to have a good time. If there is a sense of instability in the region, tourists will look for another country to take their holiday. Business tourists are much less affected by disorders or the like. They come to make money and consequently are much less affected by threats of strife."

Israel is now a fully integrated member of the global business scene, and the number of incoming business tourists is increasing rapidly. These visiting business men and women come for short business trips, so they require hotels that are adapted to their needs. It seems likely that in the future, new business hotels will be built in or near the industrial areas. The existing luxury hotels will cater to the vacationing tourist, while the new business hotels will cater primarily to the business traveler.

✕

## A business hotel >>>

The Carlton Hotel Tel Aviv is one of Israel's leading hotels. Two years ago it was voted The Best Israeli Business Hotel in 2010 at the World Travel Awards held in Turkey. These prizes are awarded annually and are based on the ratings of global tourist executives.

The Carlton is a deluxe hotel that caters to the special needs of the businessperson. Located on the Tel Aviv seashore opposite the marina, it has 270 guest rooms, ample public spaces, a business lounge and conference rooms and a roof top swimming pool.

The hotel caters to a business clientele, as well as the classic tourist industry. And it is very popular with both.

It is famous for its sumptuous breakfasts. This is a very important amenity for the business traveler, who is usually strapped for time, because the lavish meal can serve as both breakfast and lunch. Later in the evening, an early dinner will, in most cases, cover their daily nutritional needs.

The Carlton also caters to the relaxation requirements of its guests. The hotel recently installed a modern gym and spa area with state-of-the-art facilities, including kinetic apparatus and weight lifting equipment, hot and cold saunas and a Turkish steam room.



✓ Carlton Hotel lobby (Photo by Carlton Hotel)



✓ Rooftop pool at the Carlton (Photo by Carlton Hotel)

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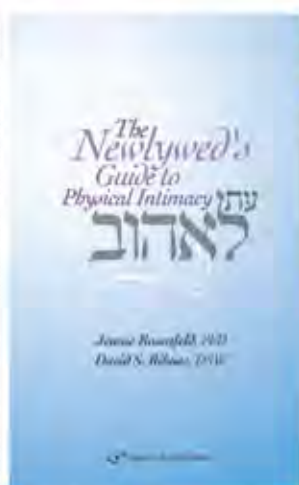
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Mano Cruises

# Cruising the Mediterranean

By Juan de la Roca II

» Cruising is a very popular pastime and has become even more so with time.

It is also very big business. In 2011 the cruise industry generated more than \$29.5 billion and carried 19 million holidaymakers. It is a very capital-oriented industry. A large modern cruise ship of the Oasis class can cost as much as \$1.4 billion.

Cruising has been a tourism option for more than 100 years. At the end of the 19th century, some British ship owners, among them Cunard, pioneered winter cruising. They were soon followed by their German counterparts. Cruising was a very convenient way of making full use of their assets – i.e., their ships.

They were North Atlantic operators, with their passenger ships making regular trans-Atlantic crossings. But the North Atlantic is an angry stretch of water during the winter months, thus trade dropped during the cold months, and some of the ships were laid off for the winter. The only way to have them bring in revenue was to use them as cruise ships in more temperate waters.

The concept of passenger ships doubling as cruise liners continued until the mid-1960s. During that period, only a few bona fide cruise ships were

constructed, such as the German *Prinzessin Victoria Luise* ship completed in 1901 and the Norwegian *Stella Solaris* completed in 1928.

These ships displaced less than 5,000 tons and carried less than 250 passengers. They were a far cry from the immense luxury liners of today. The *Royal Caribbean* Oasis class, the world's largest up to now, displaces 225,000 tons and carries up to 6,296 passengers.

Cruises offer, among other things, relaxation, which is one of the reasons I chose to spend some of my well-deserved annual vacation on a Mediterranean cruise.

The cruise industry in the first 65 years of the last century was very relaxed compared to the hectic, cabaret style entertainment atmosphere aboard current cruise ships. I personally prefer the old relaxed style, which is one of the reasons I chose to take my cruise on a ship operated by Israeli cruise company Mano Cruises. They have two ships, the *Golden Iris* and the *Royal Iris*, of 17,000 and 15,000 tons, respectively. Their food is Kosher and the entertainment is varied cabaret style for those who so wish, relaxation for those who want to enjoy the silence of the sea.

I chose the *Golden Iris* for a 14-day Mediterranean cruise, which sailed on June 3.

The advantage of an early June sailing is that it is late spring, so the weather is less hot and humid. The Mediterranean coastline of Greece, Italy and the French Riviera can be very hot in the summer. From my experience, I think the best time to cruise the Mediterranean is in the spring or the autumn.

We boarded ship on a lovely Sunday afternoon. The ship set sail at 4:30 p.m., and by 5 p.m. we had cleared Haifa harbor. What was left of our first day out at sea was spent settling in and exploring the ship.

Settling in meant arranging our things in the cabin, reserving a table in the dining room and choosing a first or second sitting. This last is a very important task, and one should choose one's table with care.

On this cruise ship, meals are served in closed and open sittings. The dining room is not large enough to accommodate all the passengers in one go. Breakfast and lunch are served buffet style on deck or in the dining room, but dinner is a more formal affair. It is served in the dining room in two sittings. The first is at 7 p.m. and the second is at 9. Dinner lasts from an hour to 90 minutes, so one should try to choose a table with interesting tablemates.

On a long cruise, the second day out is one of relaxation. The *Golden Iris* has a large outdoor pool. The sky was slightly overcast, but the weather was pleasant and the pool inviting.

On the third day, we arrived at our first port of call, which was Chania on the Greek island of Crete. The Venetians ruled Crete from the 13th to the 17th century, and Chania was their seat of government. It remained the capital of Crete during the Ottoman period and during the brief period of Crete's semi-independence. The city boasts many fine buildings, such as the former embassies and consulates built by the great powers during the period of semi-independence.

Our second port of call was Catania on the fifth day of the cruise, the fourth being an open sea day with no ports of call. Catania is a city with a long and checkered history. It was founded in the 8th century BCE. By the 14th century, Catania was one of Italy's most important cultural, artistic and political centers. In 1434 it became the seat of the first university in Sicily.

Today, Catania is one of the centers of the Italian hi-tech industry. A thriving economic, tourist and educational center on the island, it is a major hub of industry.

Our next stop was Naples, which is 15 hours' sailing time from Catania. Entering the bay of Naples at mid-morning was one of the highlights of the cruise because the view with Mount Vesuvius in the background was stunning.

Naples is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world. Founded by the Greeks in the 9th century BCE, it was called Nea Polis, or "new city."

It became the capital of the Kingdom of Naples between 1286 and 1816 and the capital of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies between 1816 and the unification of Italy in 1861. Its historic city center is the largest in Europe and is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Sights to see in Naples include the Royal Palace, the Naples Cathedral, the San Carlo Theatre, the Galleria Umberto and the Castel Nuovo. On the outskirts of the city are the Royal Palace of Caserta and the ruins of Pompeii.

Next on our itinerary was Civitavecchia, a seaport in the Tyrrhenian Sea, 80 kilometers from Rome. It has served as the port of Rome since the 2nd century. Currently it serves as the cruise destination for the Italian capital.

The city itself has some interesting sights, such as the massive Forte Michelangelo, commissioned by Pope Julius II to defend the port of Rome. It was completed in 1535.

Rome itself, the Eternal City, has an abundance of sites of historical interest, such as the Coliseum, the Arch of Constantine, the Forum, the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore, the Vatican, the monument in honor of King Víctor



✓ Happy birthday aboard ship (Photo by Adi Benzaquen)



✓ Relaxing on a sunny morning (Photo by Adi Benzaquen)

Emmanuel and the Tempio Maggiore (the Great Synagogue). The itinerary allows for a stay in Rome of eight to nine hours. Those hours should be planned carefully, as there is so much to see.

Next on the list were Nice and Monte Carlo and from there to Olbia in Sardinia. The island has become a major tourist destination, and the seaside resort of Porto Cervo has become the domain of the very rich and famous.

Palermo was our penultimate port of call. The capital of Sicily, it has a wealth of monuments built during the Norman Kingdom of Sicily. Those worth a visit are the Royal Palace, the Monreale Cathedral and the royal tombs.

Heraklion, the capital of Crete, was our last port of call. It is less historic and less picturesque than Chania, but the city is close to the ruins of the Palace of Knossos, which in Minoan times was the largest center of population on Crete.

As we sailed off from Heraklion, the sun was setting below the horizon, and Haifa was one day's cruising away.

✕



By Mark Morris II

» El Al is one of the worlds' major airlines. It operates 37 aircraft, and in 2011 it flew more than 2.1 million passengers to 34 destinations. With a turnover of more than \$2 billion in 2011, it is one of Israel's largest companies.

Although El Al is one of the country's largest companies, it is not one of the world's largest airlines. By global standards, it is a middle-sized company.

While it is not the world's largest airline, it is by far one of the safest, with an unparalleled safety record.

With the introduction of its new EconomyClass Plus, El Al has proven that it is very much attuned to the needs of the traveling public and is one of the most comfortable.

The concept on which the new class is based is not new. It is offered by such leading carriers as British Airways, Delta and United. The EconomyClass Plus is an updated version of the economy class. It is better than economy class but not as luxurious as business class or first class.

El Al is the most recent carrier to have adapted the concept. As such, it incorporates many novel features, and many travel experts consider it to be one of the best upgraded economy classes in the industry.

The El Al version offers more space, better food and passenger seats with a 30 percent greater reclining angle than that offered in economy class.

In the first phase, El Al is offering the new class on its Boeing 747-400 aircraft on the New York, London and Paris routes. The new economy class seats, which are numbered from 30 to 40, are located in the front rows of the economy class area. A curtain separates the EconomyPlus Class passengers from economy class.

The larger space per passenger and the improved creature comforts are very welcome, especially on the long routes where passengers spend many hours in their seats.



✓ EconomyClass Plus breakfast (Photo by Anatoly Michaelo)

A one-way ticket on the European routes costs \$80 more, and \$150 more on the North American route.

Eliezer Shkedi, director general of El Al, says, "We are fully responsive to the needs of the traveling public and constantly endeavor to give our clients the best flying experience possible. The new class increases the services we offer the public and provides a more prestigious and better-quality experience to our clients. We decided that the new class should be of a very high standard to compete in a very competitive environment and retain our position as the air carrier of first choice for those traveling to and from Israel."

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Larger space per passenger (Photo by Dan Levy)



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# A World Heritage to see >>>>



Bauhaus buildings in Tel Aviv  
(Courtesy of Tel Aviv municipality)

By Ehud Lahav II

» The historic center of Tel Aviv is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

As defined by UNESCO, a World Heritage Site is one that signifies an important landmark in the development of mankind. Tel Aviv is the third World Heritage Site in Israel after Masada and the walled Crusader city of Acre.

The fact that there are only three such sites in a region that has a civilized history going back more than 3,000 years is puzzling. Spain, for example, has 14. But perhaps although we have a sense of history, we are less willing than the Spaniards to devote the resources to preserve and enhance our historical landmarks.

Tel Aviv only recently made it to fame. Up to the mid-1980s, real estate developers had a field day tearing down any building that got in the way of making money. Then, when a particularly beautiful apartment building was torn down on the corner of Ahad Ha'am and Hahashmonaim streets, there was a public outcry, and the municipality decided to preserve whatever was worth preserving.

The historic center of Tel Aviv was declared a World Heritage Site because of the large number of buildings that were built in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s in the international architectural style of Bauhaus. An architectural style that flourished in Germany in the 1930s, Bauhaus has clean functional lines and aesthetic beauty. Most of the buildings constructed in that style were built in Germany. But in World War II, the Royal Air Force and the US Air Force bombarded German cities. As a result, most of the world's remaining Bauhaus buildings are found in Tel Aviv. They are located in the area bordered in the east by Ibn Gvirol and Yehuda Halevi streets, to the west by the Mediterranean Sea, to the north by the Yarkon River, and to the south by Allenby Street.

This area of Tel Aviv was built in the 1930s and 1940s by architects who either came from Germany or were educated there. The result is a wealth of Bauhaus style buildings that were adapted to Tel Aviv's Mediterranean climate, featuring many large windows, balconies, etc.

Tel Aviv was also declared a World Heritage Site because the municipality had the good sense to preserve the unique garden city planned by Patrick Geddes. He was in charge of planning in the Palestine British Mandate government in the 1920s and 1930s. He planned a city of boulevards and gardens, as well as small green areas and places of rest around the city. One of the important aspects of the city plan was parceled buildings, which means that each building was a stand-alone on its own green plot as opposed to the row houses that were current in Europe. Tel Aviv is a major example of a Patrick Geddes garden city. Tel Aviv was declared a



World Heritage Site because of the Bauhaus and Geddes elements, but in the citation the UNESCO committee also mentioned the city's varied and unique mix of architectural styles in the historic center. They named the area the White City because the original facade of the buildings was white. The architectural style is eclectic Mediterranean and Central European. It is doubtful whether such a mix of agricultural styles exists anywhere else in the world.

The municipality of Tel Aviv has declared more than 1,000 buildings as historical landmarks that cannot be torn down but should be renovated. Of these, 150 cannot be touched at all and can only be restored to their original form.

Many of these buildings are in a dilapidated state because their owners could not afford even the most rudimentary maintenance work. The cause for this was a law passed in 1940 in all parts of the British Empire that froze rents for the duration of the war. In the UK, this law was not removed from the statute books until the 1960s. In Israel, it is effective to this day.

The result was catastrophic for landowners. Rents were frozen, inflation was rampant; consequently, rents dropped to nothing. Landlords who were not getting any income had no money to make repairs or maintain their buildings. Many of the original landlords have since passed away.

Today, the new owners who are aware of the potential value of their property are busy trying to buy out the tenants who most probably bought their tenancy rights on the payment of key money. The new owners refurbish the building and then sell the apartments. As apartments in historical buildings, they fetch premium prices, even in the current slack real estate market. Old mansions in the vicinity of the lower part of Rothschild Blvd. are being purchased by law firms, financial houses and corporations and are refurbished as plush offices.

One of the reasons for the popularity of the Bauhaus style in Israel was that it was closely associated with the social democratic movement in Central Europe. Since the mid-1920s, the dominant political ideology in the Jewish Yishuv in Palestine was social democratic. With the establishment of the State of Israel, it was still very much so. In the 1950s very few apartment buildings were built in the Bauhaus style, but many public buildings were.

One of the most striking examples of Bauhaus architecture is in Dizengoff Square. All the buildings facing the square are in the Bauhaus style. Public Bauhaus buildings include the Mann Auditorium, Zionists of America House, the Helena Rubinstein Pavilion and the headquarters of the Histadrut, the Israel federation of labor.

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## » Mineral Beach

### Paradise at the Dead Sea

Every year some 200,000 people visit Mineral Beach, which is situated in the center of the Dead Sea region, at the foot of Kibbutz Mitzpe Shalem. Mineral Beach is the lowest beach in the world, lying on the picturesque bay where Nachal Hatzatzon pours into the Dead Sea.

"This is a beautiful, natural beach, with convenient access to the Dead Sea water. It is a recommended place to immerse in the natural mud that is dug out of the ground every day," says Avi Cohen, manager of Mineral Beach. "The Dead Sea is Israel's unique natural resource, and Mineral Beach is the gem that preserves its character," he adds.

The beach was named the most attractive location in the country. It is where the famous mass nude photo shoot was recently organized by photographer Spencer Tunick and where several TV series and films were shot. It also served as the setting for Amit Inbar's SUP surfboard launch.

Mineral Beach has been visited by Lady Gaga (in 2009), Martha Stewart and many other celebrities.

The beach has a natural thermo-mineral sulfur pool whose water bursts out of the ground a short distance away from the beach. Alongside the pool there is a spa where professional treatments are given in pleasant modern rooms.

The beach was recently upgraded: The coastline has been extended by approximately 100 meters to the north, and cabanas and pathways have been added for the visitors' convenience.

Parking has been arranged, allowing visitors to conveniently park their group vehicles or private cars.

The beach has been made accessible for visitors with special needs, new washrooms and showers have been built, the children's swimming pool has been refurbished, and the cafeteria has been renewed, now offering a refreshing light menu to suit the beach atmosphere.

The staff focuses on raising the standards of service and sanitation to guarantee that visitors have an enjoyable experience.

## » The roots of Zionism

The Herzl Museum is a unique experience that offers a hands-on encounter with the Zionist movement and its founder, Binyamin Ze'ev (Theodor) Herzl. The design of the museum is young and modern. Using contemporary language and spectacular audio-visual technology, the museum presents Herzl as a person and a leader.

Visitors join Herzl on a journey to Zionism, accompanying him as he formulates his positions, identifying with his hopes and disappointments, and understanding the importance of the legacy he left behind while examining the challenges we currently face.

The public is invited to take part in a unique experience and benefit from educational enrichment while also having an enjoyable time. Youth and educators, soldiers and students, adults and new immigrants – everyone is invited to become reacquainted with the Zionist vision and see how it is being realized.

## » The Tamares hotel chain

### Business, boutique and spa hotels

The Tamares chain of hotels is renowned in the field of Israeli tourism for its constant innovation. The chain operates the Daniel Dead Sea, the Daniel Herzliya, the Shizen Spa Resort Herzliya and the West Boutique Hotel Tel Aviv. The chain will soon inaugurate its new boutique hotel – the West Hotel in Ashdod.

Tamares's range of hotels features a synthesis of business, resort, boutique and spa hotels.

"Each of the chain's hotels has its own segmentation, says Anat Starik-Dahan, the chain's vice president of marketing and sales. "The Daniel Dead Sea Hotel is designed primarily for domestic tourism and, accordingly, the chain puts an emphasis on family activities during the summer and holidays. The hotel has upgraded its rooms, public areas and swimming pool, including a newly built mini-deck by the pool overlooking the scenic view."

The West Hotel Tel Aviv, which opened a year and a half ago, is a boutique hotel that has guest rooms and suites. Starik-Dahan elaborates that the accommodation at this hotel is personal in all senses. Guests are identified according to a profile that lists their preferences –from their favorite type of room to the treats of their choice. A large percentage of the guests are regular customers of the hotel or guests on a long-term stay (a month or more).

The Daniel Hotel Herzliya is popular among Israeli families, businesspeople and tourists. The Shizen Spa Resort, a boutique



✓ Hotel Exterior (Photo by Avshalom Levi)

spa hotel, is situated in the same complex and is designed for laidback and intimate vacations. Accommodation at the Shizen Spa Resort is for adults over the age of 18.

Recently, the chain began using the digital concierge system, which enables guests to purchase services at the hotel using their tablet or Smartphone. It also offers an automatic SMS service that automatically notifies guests that their room is ready when they arrive at the hotel.





# Back to the past

By Ehud Lahav II

» Caesarea, or to give it its full name Caesarea Maritima, was one of the major urban centers of the Roman East. In its heyday, the harbor, which was painstakingly constructed on a site that had no natural characteristics, was one of the major harbors in the eastern Mediterranean. The other two were Piraeus and Alexandria.

All the exports of agricultural produce of an area going as far north as Tyre and as far east as what is now Jordan were shipped from Caesarea, and all the imports to these vast areas were channeled through it.

Since those days more than 2,000 years ago, the sea has reclaimed much of its own, but enough of the harbor remains to attest to its former glory. The Caesarea Development Corporation invested large sums of money to create a small national park within the greater Caesarea National Park to show visitors what the harbor of Caesarea would have looked like 2,000 years ago. With the aid of the archeological remains and modern technology, the Caesarea Development Corporation has been able to develop a tourist attraction that in many ways recreates the past.

Aside from a magnificent beach, Greek-style restaurants, art galleries and the hand of nature in romantic sunsets and cool sea breezes, the harbor offers many other attractions. For example, The Caesarea Experience is a cinematic exhibition that takes viewers on a journey through time. It depicts the city of Caesarea Maritima from the Herodian period through the Roman, Byzantine, Arab, and Crusader periods, until the late 19th century and Baron de Rothschild's settlement programs in the area.

Besides the film, 12 historical figures associated with Caesarea Maritima over the years, such as King Herod, the Great Salah a din the Crusader, King Louis IX of France and Baron de Rothschild are portrayed by local actors, and the public can interact with them and ask questions.

One of the major attractions of Caesarea Maritima is the underwater archeological park. The sunken harbor covers an area of 200,000 square



✓ Remains of Caesarea Maritima (Photo by Dorit Lambrozo)

meters. The aim of the park is to show how the harbor was built, what techniques were used and what attempts were made to prevent its gradual destruction by the forces of nature.

Besides the harbor, Caesarea Maritima has many interesting monuments from the Roman and Medieval periods. The Caesarea Amphitheater, built by King Herod more than 2,000 years ago, is used to this day for concerts and operas. It has magnificent acoustics, evidence of the expertise of Herod's architects and engineers.

There are also the remains of an aqueduct built by Herod, which brought water from the springs of the Carmel mountain range to the north to the city.

The Medieval remains of Caesarea Maritima are due to the King Louis IX of France, also known as Saint Louis. In 1251 he arrived at what was left of the Crusader kingdom of Jerusalem and used some of his great wealth to build fortifications in the kingdom, namely in Jaffa, Acre and Caesarea. In Caesarea he built high walls surrounded by a deep moat that still exist. He also built fine gates and the Cathedral of St. Peter, much of which still remain.

✕

# Living it up at the Dead Sea

By Judah Massias II

» The Dead Sea area is a multiple tourist destination. The medicinal qualities of the Dead Sea have converted the area into a center of health tourism. It is a region of great historical interest as well, and the many high-quality hotels have made the area a major resort.

From a historical perspective, the Dead Sea has a long history because of its strategic location and its medicinal qualities. The Dead Sea is the location of the biblical Sodom and Gomorra which, because of its wanton lifestyle, was described as something of a living hell. Herod the Great built a mighty palace fortress complex atop the mountain of Masada. Today, the area to the east is dry land because the sea is slowly drying up. In those times, Masada was opposite a ford that led directly to Moab, which today is Jordan.

During the time of the Egyptian queen Cleopatra, the area was part of Egypt courtesy of Mark Anthony. Cleopatra obtained the rights to build cosmetic and pharmaceutical factories in the area. Later on, the Nabateans discovered the value of bitumen extracted from the Dead Sea, which was needed by the Egyptians for embalming their mummies.

The area also served as a place of refuge. In Roman times, the Essenes settled in Qumran on the Dead Sea's northern shore, and on the heights of Masada a small group of rebellious Jewish zealots positioned themselves in the fortress palace of Masada and held out against the might of the Roman legion.

The remoteness of the region attracted Greek Orthodox monks. Byzantine-era monasteries such as Saint George in Wadi Kelt and Mar Saba in the Judean Desert are places of pilgrimage to this day.

As one can see, it is a region with vast historical potential, and tourists visit there in ever-increasing numbers. Most go to see the historical sites and the natural wonders of Ein Gedi, with its world-famous botanical park and the unique geological formations of the area's torrid streams. These come to life with a vengeance in winter as evidenced by the eroded stream beds.

## History and nature

The Dead Sea region has been associated with many historical periods. As such, it is an archeological gold mine in many ways.

In addition to the places of outstanding historical interest, the natural and scenic attractions are outstanding, especially in winter when the weather is cool and pleasant.

The sea itself is a natural wonder, a lake that lies in the deepest part of the Great Syrian-African rift at the lowest point on the face of the Earth, 400 m (~ 1,320 feet) below sea level. It is flanked by the Judean Mountains on the west and the Moab mountains on the east. In such a location, there are places of great natural beauty and uniqueness. Here are some examples.

### Ein Gedi:

This oasis is now the site of the flourishing Kibbutz Ein Gedi. In ancient times, it was there that King Saul pursued King David and where King Solomon composed the "Song of Songs." One of the natural – well, man-made – wonders is the kibbutz's botanical gardens, the cactus park and the zoological gardens.

Near the kibbutz there are two nature reserves – the Nahal David Reserve and the Nahal Arugot Reserve. Both are excellent for hiking and for sighting ibexes and rock rabbits.

Both streams have clear flowing water year round. The Nahal David Reserve has a magnificent waterfall, while the Arugot Reserve has waterfalls and natural shallow pools, which are excellent for bathing.

### Sodom Mountain:

This is a geological ridge of pure salt in the southern part of the Dead Sea. It is believed that the salt pillar there that resembles a human form is the remains of Lot's wife. According to the Bible, Lot's wife was turned into a pillar of salt when she disobeyed divine orders not to look back at the burning cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. In Arabic, the Dead Sea is called "Lot's Sea."

### The Flour Cave:

The Flour Cave in Nahal Pratzim is an intriguing 30-meter long underground passage created by water erosion. The name "Flour Cave" comes from the soft white flour-like dust in the passage. It is situated a short drive from Ein Bokek.

### Metzuke Dragot:

In English, it means "Dragot cliffs." It is a settlement nestled inside some of the region's deepest craters, offering a magnificent desert observation point. The people living there specialize in desert tourism, which includes such activities as scaling desert mountains, snapping, rappelling, guided jeep tours and mountain biking.

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(Photo courtesy of  
www.gousrael.com)



# Experiencing nature on a bicycle

By James Harris II

» We live in an age in which the return to nature is seeing a dramatic revival. This is a normal response to the fact that a large part of the world's population is living in congested cities amid concrete blocks and very little green space. The closest they come to nature is when they set up some plants on their balconies or place a flower box or two on their window sills.

In addition to the inherent attraction to nature is the desire to become more physically fit. The combination of our modern sedentary lifestyle and the availability of masses of junk food and other processed products accounts for an excess of heavy, out of shape bodies. A large part of the world's population is not just overweight, they are obese. Consequently, bicycles are coming back into fashion as a means of transportation and as a pastime.

What's more, with the rising costs of fuel and automobile maintenance, the two-wheel option is an economical way to take a road trip and enjoy the sights and delights that nature has to offer.

Now the Jewish National Fund/Keren Kayemet Le'Israel (KKL), which is in charge of Israel's forests, is providing more opportunities for Israelis to do just that. They are laying out hundreds of kilometers of bicycle trails in the country's forests and natural open spaces. This will allow cyclists to experience the delights of nature and will avoid the potential dangers of riding a bicycle on busy streets and roads.

The KKL/JNF bicycle trails crisscross the entire country.

One of the most popular of such trails is in the Ben-Shemen Forest. The forest is located in the vicinity of the Jerusalem-Tel Aviv Highway. KKL/JNF has laid out three bicycle trails of different lengths, totaling 65 kilometers in all.

The longest trail is 32 kilometers long, the medium one is 25 kilometers, and the short trail is 12 kilometers long.

The Ben-Shemen bicycle trail is in the center of the country, but KKL/JNF has also set out bicycle trails in the southern part of Israel. One of them is located in the Bitronot Rohama nature reserve. The reserve is west of Kibbutz Rohama and south of Highway 334, or the Western Negev Highway. The area has become very popular, especially in winter when it is covered by a carpet of colorful wildflowers.

Here, KKL/JNF has opened four bicycle trails that are more or less of similar lengths. Three of them are very easy to navigate, while the fourth is somewhat more challenging because the terrain is more difficult.

The main bicycle nature trail in the North is located in the Misgav Forest, which stands astride Highway 805 that connects the coastal plain with the northern Jordan Valley and the Sea of Galilee.

To date, there is only one bicycle trail in the Misgav Forest. It is 13.5 kilometers long and rises to an altitude of 570 meters above sea level. The trail is ostensibly suitable all year round; however, it is not recommended to ride on it in the rain. The terrain is not easy to navigate mainly because it is hilly area, and there are substantial changes in height. Even for the most seasoned cyclist, riding uphill is an arduous task.

Be it on your own, as a romantic day away for two or as a group outing with family and friends, riding along these bicycle trails is a rewarding experience.

Not only will it help you get back into shape, but it will also give you an opportunity to spend some quality on your own or with others and to enjoy the beauty of the country's wooded areas and nature reserves.

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Bicycling in the Ben-Shemen Forest (Photo by Nossi Zamir)



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