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The Complete Journalism Book

by Dan Savery Raz

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TIMES OF ISRAEL

THE TIMES OF ISRAEL

As Israel faces tech workers squeeze, Palestinians offer skilled talent pool

More than 3,000 students a year graduate from computer science and engineering programs in the West Bank, creating a surplus of young talent to feed the Startup Nation's tech needs

By DAN SAVERY RAZ
3 December 2018, 1:02 pm | 3

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Interns taking part in the Palestinian Internship Progam (PIP) founded in 2014 by Israeli-American investor and entrepreneur Yadin Kaufmann (Courtesy)

Israeli high-tech companies used to outsourcing overseas are beginning to realize that the solution to their manpower problem may be right on their doorstep — in the West Bank.

More than 3,000 students a year graduate from computer science and engineering programs at universities like An-Najah in the West Bank, creating a surplus of young Palestinian talent. Though a small country on the world map, Israel is a veritable giant in the tech world, which offers Palestinians an opportunity.

an Internship Progam (PIP) founded in 2014 by Israeli-American investor and
ourtesy)

“We’re years behind the Israeli high-tech scene,” says Ibrahim, a young Palestinian who works for ASAL Tech, a software development and outsourcing company based in the city of Rawabi. “But we’re hoping to plug into some of that experience.”

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Rawabi, a flagship Palestinian tech hub, is a $1.4 billion planned city located between Modiin (in Israel) and Ramallah (in the West Bank). The brainchild of Bashar Masri — a Palestinian-American billionaire who made his fortune from real estate projects in Morocco, Jordan and Egypt — Rawabi aims to generate thousands of new permanent jobs in the city.

The Rawabi commercial and business plaza, known as the Q Center. (Courtesy)

But it’ll take more than one Rawabi to solve the Palestinian employment crisis. The unemployment rate in the Palestinian territories rose to 31.7 percent in Q3 2018. In Gaza, according to the World Bank, 54 percent of the labor force is unemployed. In Israel the unemployment rate is approximately 4 percent.

So it’s not surprising that growing numbers of Palestinians are making use of work permits in Israel. More than 100,000 Palestinians currently work in Israel, including 30,000 laborers without permits. While obtaining a work permit from Israel’s Interior Ministry is relatively straightforward after a criminal and security check, finding the right job is difficult. On top of this, many Palestinians pay up to a third of their salary to middlemen or outsource agencies.

Building bridges

Enter the Palestinian Internship Program (PIP), founded in 2014 by Israeli-American investor and entrepreneur Yadin Kaufmann, to help young Palestinians get their first experience in the startup and high-tech sector. He says the program's vision is to build bridges and enable Palestinians to one day "create their own startup nation."

Anna Gol, program director of the Palestinian Internship Program (Courtesy)

"The Israeli high-tech industry has been very open to PIP," says Anna Gol, the program director. "We currently have over 140 companies in our database that have expressed interest in participating in some way — be it hosting an intern, hosting a workshop, or being a mentor to our interns. But we need more companies to step up and host their first intern or two."

Israel is seeking to tap into new pools of talent as it faces a shortage of some 12,000-15,000 skilled workers. This workers' squeeze is considered a direct threat to the country's tech sector, which has been the main driver of the economy. The shortage is also causing a growing number of Israeli tech companies to look for talent abroad, and has sent local salaries soaring.

PIP runs two recruitment cycles each year and has so far assisted 47 young people to complete internships with multinationals that have set up branches in Israel such as Intel, Thomson Reuters and HP Indigo, and the local Teva. The most popular roles for interns are web developers or software engineers, though there's also a growing interest in finance, business development, and marketing.

"The most significant challenge PIP interns face is the skill gap," says Gol, who is originally from Toronto and completed an MA in Conflict Resolution at Tel Aviv University. "Israel-based companies have high standards for their technical roles, regardless of whether the role is entry-level or internship. Young Palestinian graduates in tech often are not at the same skill level as an Israeli tech graduate. However, they have the potential, and PIP shares opportunities for interns to get further training" by connecting them to technical training courses, arranging technical mentoring and workshops.

Other challenges young Palestinian interns face in Israel include basics like finding a place to live and adapting to a higher cost of living. "Culturally, it can be an adjustment for an intern from a Palestinian village moving to Tel Aviv for an internship. However, PIP staff have developed a very supportive network to assist in settling interns into a comfortable environment," says Gol.

That's not to mention the political climate and recent troubles in Gaza. Yet Gol says that the tech community is generally unfazed by tensions. Indeed the program's first cycle,which took place during the 2014 Gaza war, was a runaway success.

PIP is an apolitical organization that's not affiliated with either the Palestinian Authority or the Israeli government. Currently funded by MEPI (Middle East Partnership Initiatives) managed by the US State Department, it does work with a branch of Israel's Defense Ministry that administers the West Bank — COGAT, the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories — providing PIP interns with security permits and assistance with cross-border transportation.

A Palestinian Startup Nation?

Of course, Palestinian tech partnerships and cities like Rawabi are not without their critics such as the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement and other groups, who accuse them of "normalization" with Israel.

"Our goal is to help young Palestinians develop their skills in a professional manner, and help them jumpstart their careers in high-tech," says Gol. "Once they have been able to develop their skills, they can begin to move into leadership positions. In PIP's 5 years of activity, we have seen alumni go on to complete higher education, manage Palestinian tech hubs, and start their own companies, all of which contribute to the growth of the Palestinian tech sector."

So, can Palestinians create their own startup nation? "They are already on their way to doing so," says Gol. "But to continue down this path of success, there needs to be increased confidence in investing in a Palestinian tech-based economy. More young people need to step into leadership roles, and we hope to see more Israeli and multinational companies involved with PIP in 2019."

Besides providing employment and opportunities for young Palestinians, programs like PIP are also breaking down social barriers. "Young Palestinians, who have only known Israelis as soldiers and politicians, have developed personal and professional relationships with Israelis during their internships," says Gol. "Young Israelis who have known Palestinians only from the negative portrayals in media learn firsthand about Palestinian culture and society — their Palestinian colleagues are real people, with real experiences to share and learn from. True friendships have been formed through this economic collaboration."

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THE TIMES OF ISRAEL
THE BLOGS
Dan Savery Raz

Should young Israelis boycott Pink Floyd?

JUL 19, 2017, 3:39 PM

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Radiohead's Thom Yorke highlighted the hypocrisy of BDS movement "From A Great Height."

In case you didn't know, Radiohead just played live in Tel Aviv. It was part of their summer tour which included their headline performance at this year's Glastonbury Festival. But the run-up to the concert, in Tel Aviv's Hayarkon Park, was overshadowed by a storm of 'controversy'. Palestinian flags were waved at their latest gigs in the UK and Roger Waters of Pink Floyd fame, very publically, urged Radiohead not to play.

Normally, artists don't respond publically to Waters and co, but Thom Yorke did. He stated that, "Music, art and academia is about crossing borders not building them, about open minds and not closed ones, about shared humanity, dialogue and freedom of expression. I hope that makes it clear…"

Waters accused Thom Yorke of "whining" and said artists should "observe the picket line." But what exactly is the 'picket line' when it comes to a music concert? And how is not playing to a crowd, most of which, does not agree with Netanyahu's government, going to help bring peace?

Waters is a major voice of Artists For Palestine, part of the BDS (Boycott, Divestment & Sanctions) movement. Almost every major rock artist that comes to Israel receives a letter from the BDS movement, usually signed by Roger Waters or film director Ken Loach, urging them to cancel their show.

But the question remains, what makes Roger Waters, a multi-millionaire rockstar aged 73, so passionate about the Palestinian cause? Is he fuelled by love of the Palestinian people or hatred of Israel?

And when I say Israel, I mean, the Israeli people, not government. Because artistic boycotts do not affect Netanyahu – he couldn't care less if Radiohead played or not. Artistic and academic boycotts deprive the very people who can help bring peace – young, left-wing Israelis and Palestinians.

Now, I don't want to get into the mind of Roger Waters too deeply. But, some could claim his motives spring from a new form of anti-Semitism. Waters and other BDS 'activists' focus all their anger on Israel, and do not feel so passionately about boycotting countries with human rights atrocities such as China or Saudi Arabia.

The strange thing is, Israelis still love Pink Floyd, almost to a fanatical extent. Most secular Israeli households grew up on *Dark Side of the Moon* and *Wish You Were Here* and Floyd songs get regular airplay on Israeli radio to this day. But Waters is determined to teach Israel a lesson.

Waters said Radiohead should “educate themselves” about what is going on. But Radiohead ‘Don’t need no education’ or ‘Thought control’, to borrow his own words. Radiohead’s guitarist Jonny Greenwood is married to an Arab-Israeli and the band are probably better informed than most on the situation.

It seems as if Waters became a real-life, self-fulfilling version of his ‘Pink’ character from *The Wall* – a crazed, tyrannical rock star whose ego got the better of him. His ego was part of the reason Pink Floyd fell apart in one of the most bitter break-ups in rock n’ roll history.

Die-hard fans often claim that the real talent of Pink Floyd was the much-missed Richard Wright, the keyboard and organ player, who was responsible for much of their atmospheric orchestration. Dave Gilmour with his thunderous, other-worldly guitar solos led the band after Waters departed in the early 80s. And Nick Mason, the drummer, was an unsung hero who often held the whole sound together. The three remaining Floyd members continued using the band name and had huge commercial success with live tours such as *Pulse* in 1994.

Therefore, Waters, who penned most of their lyrics, does have a right to be bitter. Perhaps, his bitterness got the better of him in the end.

The Radiohead song ‘Drunken Punch-up at a Wedding’ includes the lyrics, ‘Hypocrite… Opportunist… You had to piss on our parade.’ Though recorded for 2003’s *Hail to the Thief* album, this tongue-in-cheek song seems relevant for Radiohead’s disagreement with Waters. Quite literally, Waters was pissing on Radiohead’s parade.

The two bands, Radiohead and Pink Floyd, have often been compared. *Ok Computer* is the 90s’ version of *Dark Side of the Moon* – intelligent, complex themes, yet simple song structures and instantly hailed as a modern classic. But the bands are very different. Radiohead, five old school friends from Oxford, are still very much together after 25 years in the limelight. Pink Floyd were torn apart by their success.

For years, Dave Gilmour and Roger Waters were not on speaking terms. Even the enforced reunion for *Live 8* in 2005 didn’t heal the wounds. Waters is someone who doesn’t like to back down and, when it comes to his political views of Israel, he will not waver.

Airing his views, of course, is totally acceptable but actively trying to dissuade or influence other artists about an issue is where Waters crosses the ‘picket line’. Perhaps it is he who needs to open his mind and be ‘educated’ on what’s going on. Tel Aviv is a vibrant, cosmopolitan city, the heartbeat of young Israeli culture, art and music. The vast majority of Tel Avivians don’t vote for the right-wing parties of Likud or Beit HaYehudi, instead it’s a stronghold of Labour and Meretz, parties that actively want to start peace negotiations with the Palestinians.

A boycott of Tel Aviv does not open a conversation, it closes one. Tel Avivans, who have also suffered from their fair share of terrorist attacks by Hamas in recent decades, are the first to criticize their government. In 2011, the city became engrossed in the biggest wave of protests against its government, demanding social justice, democracy and fair living conditions.

Barack Obama, when he came to Israel in 2013, chose to speak to a conference hall filled with young students instead of addressing the Knesset (Israeli parliament), because he knew that's where change will come from. He understood that the older generation of Israeli politicians and army generals are so corrupt that they will not be able to broker a lasting peace with their Arab neighbours. Peace has to come from the grassroots.

So the 'artistic' boycott movement is deeply flawed or 'Floyd', if you excuse the pun. You don't boycott America because you disagree with Trump, you don't boycott the UK because you hate the Tories. By responding so eloquently to Waters' form of bullying, Radiohead highlighted the hypocrisy of the BDS movement. From a great height.

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THE BLOGS
Dan Savery Raz

Let's Start a War (on Waste)

SEP 18, 2017, 4:55 PM

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"Welcome to a waste-free zone," read the sign in Slovenia. The sign marked the entrance to a pop-up outdoor food market at Lake Bled, one of the most popular tourist spots in this picture-perfect Alpine country in Eastern Europe. After eating a few very non-vegan hot dogs, my small family were instructed to put our biodegradable plates and forks into some marked containers at the exit. Although many people were eating from these food stands, when I glanced back I noticed something strange – there was not one tiny bit of rubbish (that's real English for 'garbage') in the whole market. So simple.

In fact, all over Slovenia, even in the capital city of Ljubljana, I didn't notice any litter (that's the Queen's English). Remarkable. Jack Kerouac once wrote, "Comparisons are odious" but I couldn't help odiously comparing Slovenia to my home town of Tel Aviv. Here, and indeed all over Israel and the Palestinian Territories, you'll barely find a street corner without some trash (Ok, I gave in and used American English). Tel Avivians on the move tend to empty the contents of their apartment on the street, hoping by passers will pick up their leftover 'treasures' of cracked Patrick Swayze DVDs, out-of-order televisions, 1990s Lonely Planet guides and never-opened Rick Ashley CDs. (I admit I've never seen Rick Ashley CDs on the street and if I had, I would probably be quite chuffed). But the point remains that our beloved Tel Aviv is… well… a bit of a dump. It's a lively, authentic, and hip dump, but still a dump nonetheless. Isn't it time we cleaned it up?

According to the Ministry of Environment Protection, some 75% of Israel's waste ends up in landfill sites and just 25% is recycled. While Slovenia recycles 54% of its waste, making it the third cleanest country in Europe after Germany (66%) and Austria (56%).

Anyone who lives in Tel Aviv-Jaffa knows it's a crazy time right now with the construction of the light rail, plus a never-ending cycle of infrastructure and renovation work going on across the city. Sometimes it seems as if the city has simply given up on being presentable, or at least for the next five years. It's like a middle-aged man who's 'letting go'. The local logic must be that if the whole city has become a building site, then why not treat it like one?

I live on what real estate agents claim is 'the best street in Tel Aviv' (there are approximately 115 of these). Yet, on any given day I could step outside my front door and be greeted with my neighbour's half-eaten chicken legs, used tampons, and smashed glass. This is on top of the ingrained dog excrement ('dog shit' in plain English) that means the 'four-second rule' can never apply in Tel Aviv. Tip: If you accidentally drop some food on the pavement, best not to eat it.

Don't get me wrong – Tel Aviv's Municipality (who we pay a substantial amount of tax every month so they can do 'fun' things like light-up City Hall as a game of Tetris) does have an environmental unit and regularly collects rubbish. You don't need an alarm clock in Tel Aviv as the noisy rubbish trucks and workers shouting will happily wake you up at 5:30am. So the problem isn't the rubbish trucks. The problem is mixed rubbish and the sheer amount of packaging. It could be said that the three 'P's of packaging, petrol and poop are causing most of Tel Aviv's pollution.

Now, even Donald Trump can't deny the world is becoming increasingly polluted. Even if the tycoon-president doesn't believe in global warming (I should add that 2017 was the hottest year ever-recorded in Slovenia), even he could agree that the planet has become more polluted in his lifetime. Our forests, seas, rivers, lakes, coral reefs, beaches and more are becoming increasingly dirty. There are many factors contributing to this but let's look at just one – packaging.

Many Israeli hi-tech companies provide their employees with 10bis cards. In case you don't know what 10bis is, it's subsidized or free food that can be ordered online from a network of participating restaurants. I've worked in a few hi-tech companies and have always been astounded at just how much waste is created at lunchtimes and the amount of unnecessary one-time-use packaging that comes with takeaway food. As an example, a hamburger from the Wolfnights chain comes with enough cardboard to build a little house. Over-packaging is not only Israel's filthy habit. It's found all over the world. But the difference is that in the Holy Land, there's a distinct lack of recycling facilities.

In Tel Aviv most apartment buildings have two green dustbins for general waste and, if you're lucky, a blue bin for paper. Plastic bottles can be deposited at recycling points but what about other materials such as glass, cardboard, aluminum, mixed packaging, biodegradables and compost? Even in the UK, admittedly not the eco-friendliest nation on earth, most local councils now supply residents with bins to separate rubbish for recycling. My own parents who live in Cambridge, knew absolutely nothing about the environment just 15 years ago, now religiously recycle almost everything, have a compost heap, grow their own organic vegetables and collect rain water from their roof for watering plants in the garden. Though Israel is a global innovator on drip irrigation and reverse osmosis (desalinating sea water), it is far behind when it comes to waste management.

Israel does have some forward-thinking eco-kibbutzim such as Kibbutz Lotan, Ketura and Samar in the Negev and some worthy environmental NGOs such as Adam Teva and Eco Peace. Yet, when it comes to green living and responsible tourism, there's still a lot of work to be done. Perhaps, we in the Middle East have wasted so much time and money on war that we have none to fight the war on waste.

Lovely Slovenia is winning its war on waste. The country's nature parks, mountains, and villages, are immaculately kept. Its streets are clean, its freshwater lakes are crystal clear and its waterfalls are protected from bathers. Slovenian people seemed notably chilled out. Who knows, if we could make Israel a more sustainable environment then maybe it would be a more peaceful environment? Then Israel's incurable dreamers could declare their country a 'waste-free' and a 'war-free' zone.

Read more info on Zero Waste here.

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Selfie Sameach: The Future of Purim

MAR 4, 2018, 9:38 AM

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Purim is big in Israel. Bigger than Jesus. Definitely bigger than Christmas and probably bigger than Chanukkah. All parents of Israeli kids know that Purim starts a month-and-a-half before the festival, with preparing and ordering costumes, (nowadays via AliExpress, no advertising intended).

In Tel Aviv, Purim celebrations are spread out over two weeks, with pre- and post-Purim parties. Every nightclub and bar prides itself on its 'wacky' costume parties. Hi-tech corporations compete with each other to throw the wildest night for their employees. Enthusiastic employees take time off work to invest in creating 'crazy' team costumes. Millions of shekels are spent on wigs and hats as well as cheap chocolate for *'Mishloch Manot'* gift baskets.

Grown men wear what-looks-like a dildo on their heads – thinking they look like unicorns. Boys dress like girls. Girls dress like call girls. Guys in Batman outfits shoot by at supersonic speed on their electric scooters, nearly causing a car crash.

It's a face-paint-tastic, cape-wearing, glitter-fest meant to rival the likes of Rio Carnival. And why are people going crazy for this festival? Well, officially, it's a minor Jewish festival to commemorate the Megillah – the story of Esther overcoming the age-old Jewish enemy of Haman in ancient Persia.

But today it's about one thing and one thing only – the Selfie.

If there's anything people here love more than getting dressed up, it's taking pictures of themselves. Luckily for them, Purim combines the two.

In fact, from next year (2019) the Mayor of Tel Aviv has announced that Purim is going to be renamed 'Selfie'. People will wish each other a 'Selfie Sameach'.

Supermen and Superwomen will hold competitions of how many 'likes' their selfies get on Instagram. The superheroes with the most likes will win a Super Selfie – their image displayed on billboards along the Ayalon Highway. All school children will be given smartphones to take selfies. All celebrities and politicians have to take selfies. And so on.

The Purim tradition of 'getting so drunk you can't tell your friends from enemies' will be changed to 'taking so many selfies you don't have any real friends.' Because the Selfie festival is all about pretending to have a good time, not actually enjoying the moment.

The Purim tradition of 'getting so drunk you can't tell your friends from enemies' will be changed to 'taking so many selfies you don't have any real friends.' Because the Selfie festival is all about pretending to have a good time, not actually enjoying the moment.

It's a celebration of 'fakeness' or 'fake fun', which has been statistically proven better than real fun. If parties used to be about good vibes, today it's about going viral.

So Happy Purim everyone. It may well be your last. See you at next year's Selfie parade.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dan Savery Raz is a Lonely Planet author, and has written for BBC.com, Time Out & various websites. Born in England, he lives in Tel Aviv with his wife & children.

THE BLOGS
Dan Savery Raz

Israel at 70: Plastic or peace?

How much waste will we avoid if we all eat off reusable plates at our BBQs this Independence Day?

APR 15, 2018, 12:35 PM

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After a barbecue, at Park HaYarkon, April 2018. (Courtesy, Dan Savery Raz)

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Israel is turning 70 this week, in case you hadn't heard. Amazingly, that's four years younger than Mick Jagger. To celebrate, Miri Regev — Israel's shy and unassuming culture minister — called for 70 hours of festivities, including 70 km (some 43 miles) of parties in beaches and parks. God only knows how much garbage will be created this Independence Day. Maybe 70,000 tons?

All over Israel, people are getting ready for a party. For over 70 percent of the population (probably much more), this will mean attending some kind of barbecue. Now, this is not an article about the rights and wrongs of eating meat, (grilled courgette, anyone?). My beef is with the sheer amount of plastic waste that will no doubt be left to pollute the country's natural spaces.

Park HaYarkon, last week after a barbecue.

Plastic Places

Like every other year (and every other weekend), alpha males will take over the country's parks with their family barbecues. Armed with lighter fluid and barbecue tongs, this army of middle-aged men is a formidable force. They bring with them cooler boxes filled with semi-frozen kebabs and chicken skewers wrapped in plastic, as well as plastic bags filled with plastic hummus tubs, plastic bottles, plastic cups, plastic knives-and-forks and plastic plates.

You may ask, what's wrong with that? Well, let's take Tel Aviv's Park Hayarkon as an example. This, the city's largest green space, will be littered with one-time-use plastic and disposable barbecues burning out. The park has sufficient dustbins, but many people either don't use them or overpile them so high with unnecessary garbage that much of the waste will get blown around or scavenged by birds.

The plastic problem doesn't just end at the parks. All over the country, people at private parties in their homes, weddings, bar mitzvahs or ordering food daily from 10bis (a takeaway service), embrace the trend of using one-time packaging and utensils.

All this plastic creates mountains of waste, quite literally. The Ariel Sharon Park near Ben Gurion Airport is a man-made mountain that was once 25 million tons of landfill waste. It was dubbed an "environmental park," but really it's a huge waste dump with grass on top. Is this what Israel wants to be remembered for after 70 years? Plastic hills?

Waste Not, Want Not

On the TV and radio in Israel, we hear much about this remarkable nation's achievements. The very fact that the country exists, following the Holocaust, is in itself a source of pride for many Jews (and non-Jews) around the globe. We often hear about Israel's democracy, scientific achievements, its talented academics and artists, and, of course, the cherry tomato. Though it is important for the country to celebrate its history, many Israelis can see past the festivities.

According to The Times of Israel, this year's celebrations will cost more than 100 million NIS ($30 million). Miri Regev said, "You won't be bored," as she outlined parades, light shows, air shows and much more. This may bring in the tourist buck for a while, but perhaps a more meaningful way to mark Israel's 70th birthday would be to dedicate a new hospital? Maybe Israel at 70 could grant a well-deserved pay rise for nurses, social workers and teachers (who all get embarrassingly-low salaries).

Our politicians waste money, waste words and waste time (remember the peace process?), and this trickles down to the public. It's the cynical "someone else will clean it up" mentality that causes us (me included) to take the planet and its future for granted.

And anyway, who has time to care about the environment when you have Hamas, Hezbollah, Iran and Syria on your doorstep?

Blue and White (and Green)

But it's not all doom and gloom. Green issues are climbing the agenda, but progress is slow. Last year, Israeli supermarkets started charging 10 agorot for plastic bags. A survey by Globes showed that 42 percent of Israelis now use reusable shopping bags.

Tel Aviv claims to be a "green city" with its tree-planting programs, plastic bottle banks, city-wide bicycle scheme, urban farms and community gardens. But this is small-scale environmentalism.

Recycling needs to be wider spread and include more materials. Plus, recycling deals with the symptom and not the root of the waste problem — over-consumption and over-production.

Hilton Park in Tel Aviv overflowing with garbage.

So, this year I'm taking a small stand. My family and I are not going to use any one-time cutlery or plates. If we go to a barbecue, we'll bring our own reusable Ikea plates from home. This small act may sound pathetic, but if everyone washed and re-used their plates, there'll be 70% less waste, (okay, I made that statistic up).

The Bible says, "Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; cease to do evil, learn to do good." (Isaiah 1:16). But if that's too much to ask of modern Israel, then at least: "Wash up after yourselves, use a dishwasher, cease to use plastic, learn to use a sponge."

In short, if Israel is a special country, then we should treat it as such. One day, instead of celebrating with plastic and shit, we could celebrate with peace and shalom.

I’m Not a Robot

NOV 11, 2018, 8:28 PM

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The Good, the Bad and the Ugly of Technology

It all started with ATMs. Automated Teller Machines that dispersed cash and occasionally chewed up our bank cards. ATMs started talking, saying ‘Please enter your pin number’ and ‘Thank you.’ They were polite. They saved time. They made sense.

Then came chip and pin cards, no need for cash, you just had to remember your pin number and ‘Remove your card’ when told to. Then came contactless cards – no need for pin numbers, you just had to tap your card on a machine. Next will no doubt be the mass migration to Apple Pay and so on.

Although it’s a hi-tech hub, Israel is a little behind on these banking developments – people mostly use credit cards and scribble meaningless signatures on pieces of paper. Yet since I made Aliyah and moved to Israel from London ten years ago, the UK has morphed into a kind of ‘contactless country’. Drinkers in pubs, shoppers in M&S (Marks & Spencer’s) and commuters on the London Underground are all tapping their contactless cards, each tap deducting money from their accounts as if nothing had happened. It’s a ‘transactionless’ transaction, if you like. No money exchanged. No handshakes. And definitely no eye-contact please, we’re British.

The contactless society is all about saving time, not cash. And what’s wrong with that? Well, nothing it seems on the surface. Except the niggling feeling underneath that we, as humans, may be drawing closer to becoming robotic, contactless creatures.

Now this may sound a little dramatic – humans (especially those in Israel like myself) have a tendency to be over-emotional sometimes – but let’s look at how the consumerist world is changing.

Check-in & Check-out Machines

Step inside any supermarket in England and you’ll find a cluster of self-checkout machines, often ‘manned’ by one or two people. These self-checkout machines (which are slowly being introduced in Israel) are quicker than waiting for a shop assistant, we often don’t need to say hello to anyone. Shoppers simply pay and go on with their contactless lives.

Airports in London now have queue-saving self-check-in stands, where passengers weigh their own luggage, print their own sticker and send their bag through on the conveyer belt towards security. Is this contactless travel?

Fast food restaurants like McDonalds now offer the 'McTouch' way of ordering meals. Customers simply touch the screen to 'build their burger' and wait for their order to appear on the screen. Contactless cuisine, anyone?

And finally, there's the much-hyped development of driverless cars. Yes, the autonomous automobile is coming in the next five years or so, they say. Perhaps our children will laugh that we once actually steered the wheel of a car. What idiots we were, they'll say. What brainless baboons!

Yet, call me a luddite or a technophobe, but something inside me feels uneasy with all this contactless AI (artificial intelligence). Allow me to share a recent experience.

The Human Touch

Recently my father was diagnosed with Burkett's lymphoma, a type of blood cancer in his stomach. After the diagnosis, my parents and I went for lunch at a not-so-fancy Nando's restaurant in Cambridge. When we arrived, a young, bearded waiter (presumably a student) greeted us and asked where we'd like to sit. He asked us, 'What's the occasion?' My mother answered honestly. The waiter said, 'I'm sorry to hear that' and showed us to our table. At the end of the meal I wanted to tip the waiter but he refused to accept my money. He just said, 'Buy your Mum a coffee,' then looked at my mum and said, 'Everything's going to be alright.' This may sound like a small gesture but it meant the world to us. For a brief moment the waiter, a stranger, empathised with us, as only humans can do. A robotic AI waiter, even if programmed to empathise, wouldn't have had the same effect.

And this is the main point – if we create a future without the need for human shopkeepers, waiters, drivers and even doctors, then we will lose something fundamental – the human touch.

Don't get me wrong – not all AI technology is harmful. But it is becoming increasingly important to decipher the beneficial 'responsible technology' from the potentially harmful 'irresponsible technology'. Huge leaps have been made in medicine and green technologies such as hybrid cars. On the other hand, we're also racing at full speed towards harmful technologies that could eliminate millions of jobs and alienate us further from each other. In the wrong hands, deadly technologies such as military drones and other examples of robotic warfare, could cause unimaginable damage.

The Industrial Age-Old Argument

Today the retail business is facing a genuine crisis. Small independent shops cannot compete with giants like Amazon and Walmart. Although it started life as an online book store, Amazon in Europe now delivers groceries and anything else you can think of. It's a modern form of monopolization – killing competition and homogenizing culture.

Now when you talk to certain people about the 'tech revolution' they'll say that it's part of our evolution and that people had the same warnings before the industrial revolution. Others will say it's progress and letting technology do all the mundane work means humans have more free time. But what will most people do with this free time?

We're living in virtual reality if we think everyone is suddenly going to become intellectual or 'enlightened' and start reading books or going for walks in the forest. Unfortunately, trends show that more and more free time of people, especially young millennials, is spent on their devices – checking each other out on Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, WhatsApp or whatever social media comes next. In Israel, as in many other countries, teenagers are spending hours on end playing games like Fornite, which ironically is about saving humanity.

The danger of addictive virtual reality games and devices, is that we as humans will become increasingly disconnected from each other and the natural or 'real' world.

Hi Tech, Low Morals?

So where does Israel come into all this? Israel is considered one of the most technological advanced nations today. The hi-tech industry is the pride of Israel's investors and politicians. No doubt much of this artificial intelligence will come from Israeli companies, for example MobileEye that was acquired by Intel for $15BN. Last week saw the arrival of AWE – the world's biggest augmented reality conference in Tel Aviv. Artificial intelligence and automations are major trends in tech at present. But are these private companies considering the long-term consequences of AI or just looking to make a quick buck?

There's no doubt hi-tech has been good for Israel – it provides employment, advanced medical facilities and not to mention the world-famous Iron Dome missile defense system that has saved thousands of lives. But in reality, a large proportion of Israel's hi-tech industry has also been in dubious domains such as online gambling, porn, forex and malware. Not exactly a light unto the nations.

The next tech target is children. There's talk of schools collaborating with the cyber industry and introducing tablets into the classroom to prepare them as 'digital citizens'. Some Knesset members, mentioning no names, (Naftali Bennet), are keen to introduce more technology into schools. Global arms company Lockheed Martin, who build fighter jets, are now funding pre-schools in Jerusalem with the intent of teaching children about technology and science at an earlier age.

But Israelis are not easily fooled. Some parents question the intent of private companies who want to enter the classroom and are battling to keep children away from intrusive technology. Alternative education such as anthroposophical kindergartens and schools – where the human spirit, traditional development of senses and working with hands are at the core – are growing in popularity in Israel, almost becoming mainstream.

Elsewhere, there are signs that Israelis are acutely aware of the dangers of the sensory overload of technology. In Tel Aviv more and more people practice mindfulness, yoga and meditation. Tech companies like Google and Wix even offer meditation sessions to their employees. And the Tel Aviv municipality even ran a billboard advertising campaign encouraging pedestrians to take a 'screen break'.

Only time will tell if we, as a society, manage to put in the necessary 'checks and balances' to reduce harmful impacts and encourage responsible technology. Though we can't halt the march of technology, then at least we could nudge it in the right direction. After all, we're not robots.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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The Faster Times of Israel

JUN 13, 2019, 12:16 AM

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Tel Aviv: Life is what happens to you while you're busy stuck in traffic jams.

Time flies but does it fly faster in the Middle East?

Each time I fly from Tel Aviv to London, something strange happens. As soon as we land and go through the airport, I feel like I'm in a different reality, not a different country. Let me explain further – it's as if the pace of time itself has changed and slowed down. Then during my stay I notice that 24 hours in London feels longer than a day in Tel Aviv. Now, this claim is based on absolutely zero scientific evidence or 'data' – but I estimate that time travels approximately 1.57 times faster in Israel.

It's not just me. Others who live in Israel and came from elsewhere have noticed this phenomenon. Friends have told me numerous times that they experience time simply passing by faster in the heat and chaos of Israel.

A popular saying in Hebrew is *z'man tas* meaning 'time flies'. Of course, Brits say this too but in my mind, UK time is a cruiser airline while Israeli time is a fighter jet. Just look at the headlines, it's easy to see there's a lot going on in this part of the world. Is it any wonder Israelis often feel the need to say *la'at, la'at* ('slowly, slowly') or *shway, shway* in Arabic?

You could say it's just an illusion – that it's the concept of our so-called busy lives that makes us feel like we're on turbo time. You could say it's an urban phenomenon – that all fast-paced cities are, well, faster paced. But I want to dig deeper and explore this phenomenon.

Tectonic Tensions

Israel and the Palestinian Territories is geographically located in the centre of the Middle East, where the shifting Eurasian, Arabian and African tectonic plates converge. Modern Israel also represents the convergence of religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam, as well as heightened political tensions. It's home to a dynamic hi-tech industry and continuous building development, all taking place in a relatively compressed landmass, the size of New Jersey.

On top of this, nearly 50% of the population reside in Gush Dan, the bustling centre of Israel. Every day there's traffic jams on the highways, everyone's always in a rush. Sometimes Israel feels like eight million people stuck in a traffic jam.

All this means that Israel is an intense place with a high concentration of energy. There's no time to be bored. There's always action. But is there such a thing as too much action? If we're always rushing from the next crisis or craze to the next, then we can't reflect, contemplate and consider where to go next.

One reason why time feels faster in Israel could be the weather. Israel and the Palestinian Territories enjoy a Mediterranean climate with year-round sun. This means that it can feel like there's no real seasons. With the exception of this past year's rainy winter, there's usually only a dozen or so rainy days annually. Winter comes and goes quickly, and spring and autumn kind of blend into summer. The sun sets around the same time every day (around 6-7pm), unlike the northern hemisphere, where it can get dark at 9pm in summer and 3pm in the winter. This lack of seasonal changes makes the months and years pass by in a blur.

Festival Fatigue

Then there's the Jewish festivals. And there's a lot of 'em. At any time of year, you can't go wrong by saying 'Chag Sameach'. No sooner do our children start the academic year in September, then comes Rosh HaShana, followed swiftly by Yom Kippur and a week of Sukkot. Two months later there's Chanukkah, followed by a steady run of Tu BiShvat, Purim, Pesach, Yom Hatzmaut and Shavuot, then school's out for two months from July. The *chaggim* are very special in Israel but they do take a toll and can make us, particularly parents, feel like we're frantically jumping from holiday to holiday, while trying to work, rest and plan our lives in between.

That's not to mention all the weddings, birthdays, Bat and Bar Mitzvahs, work parties, fun days, school trips, Shabbat dinners, and other family gatherings.

On top of the Jewish festivals and family events, Tel Aviv has a pretty busy social calendar. Marathons, half-marathons, bike rides, *Laila Lavan*, Eurovision (this year), live music events, food and drink festivals, the Pride Parade all build up our expectations – again taking us away from the 'now' or thinking about the long-term.

This relentless 'need for speed' and short-term thinking is not always beneficial for business. A little-reported truth in Tel Aviv is that many shops, restaurants and startups have short lifespans. Countless bars and restaurants open every year in the city, many riding on a trend or buzz after opening, then closing down after a short honeymoon period. Tel Avivians are always looking for the next big thing, but when that new thing becomes old, it ceases to interest.

Similarly, other sectors, such as charity, education and the environment are often overlooked as people don't have time to think or worry about the long-term. Everyone's too busy dealing with the immediate crisis or current trend. Who cares what will happen in twenty years? Who cares if we're behind in terms of recycling our waste? Who knows even if we'll be here in twenty years?

Turbo Technology

Receiving endless notifications, reminders and messages gives us the illusion of being perpetually busy.

Or maybe I'm wrong, as I am frequently. Maybe the fast pace of Israeli life has nothing to do with its political tensions, climate, festivals or events. Perhaps, it's a global phenomenon that's part of the age of technology. Even if you're not the CEO of a startup, simply managing your Gmail, Facebook, WhatsApp or other online accounts, can eat up all your free time.

Receiving endless notifications, reminders and messages gives us the illusion of being perpetually busy, even if we're not.

That's not to mention addictive media like Netflix, Youtube, 24-hour news or social gaming – we literally don't have time to be bored any more. It's only when we go far away and 'unplug' for a while do we find we have minutes and hours to kill *or fill* (depending on how you view free time). And what is free time anyway? Aren't we always supposed to be free?

Perhaps it's just a universal 'age thing'. As we get older, time seems to speed up. Evidently, a year feels different at 40 than it did at 18-years-old. Some elderly people view years passing by like months, as if they're running out of time, while others experience life dragging on.

Maybe it's being a parent – children take up so much of our time that we feel like we have none left for ourselves. Yet, even before I was a father of three, I felt – and it's nothing more than a 'gut feeling' – that time whizzed by faster in Israel. I never looked at my watch in Israel and thought, 'Wow, it's going slow today'.

I'm also aware that this is only my own individual perception and that time is as subjective as it is abstract. Yet, after living in Israel for over a decade, I've seen how quickly things change here and how slowly things change in the UK. In Israel, change is the only constant.

Time Wasters

Despite all this change and 'development', Israeli politics is at a stalemate. Politicians know that people yearn for stability. Hence, Benjamin Netanyhu has been PM for a decade and Ron Huldai has been Mayor of Tel Aviv since 1998. The major political parties openly celebrate keeping the 'status quo'.

Leaders deliberately waste time and use delay tactics to halt change. Bibi has openly tried to postpone the October court hearings into his corruption charges. So-called 'King Bibi' has made a career of delaying peace talks with the Palestinians. The upcoming elections in September are being used as yet another excuse to slow down the US-led peace process. Right-wingers such as Naftali Bennett deliberately sabotage any mention of peace talks. Of course, terrorist organizations like Hamas are also turning back time, deliberately perpetuating the cycle of hate, retaliation and chaos. The question is: Are we running out of time for peace?

War, and the threat of war, are obviously not good for long-term thinking. In times of peace, Israel is able to breathe – people start caring more about improving infrastructure, the environment, education and human rights. But then a war comes along and all that progress and long-term planning is eclipsed by short-term anger and radical nationalism.

Taking Back Time

But there is a way out. While it's true that we can't slow down time, we can change our lives and our perception of time.

Firstly, many people are realising the importance of practices such as meditation, mindfulness and other ways to 'press the pause button'. Some are aware that we need to take a break from our phones, the endless messages, the internet, advertising, TV and other technology that eats up our minutes.

This is not being a technophobe – on the contrary, it's about taking control of our use of technology, rather than being controlled by it. After all, the best technology is designed to save us time, not take it away from us.

Perhaps, we need to go deeper and draw inspiration from something much older and slower than us – nature itself. For example, any gardener will tell you that to grow a tree takes a lot of patience. First you must plant the seeds, then over months, with the right conditions, some of the seeds germinate, take root, before growing out of the ground as a young sapling.

Good things take time, or so they say. So why are we in such a rush to get through life? And why does modern society and education rush children into adulthood? Some research shows that teenage years now start earlier at 9 or 10-years-old. It's not surprising that more parents are realising that they need to defend their children from the fast-paced world. Like a tree, a child must be given time to grow naturally. Too many exams, deadlines, homework, adverts, consumerism, computer games and general adult-related stress can take away from childhood.

Waldorf education, based on the philosophy of Rudolph Steiner, the founder of anthroposophy, is one way of letting children grow in a more holistic manner. Anthroposophic-style kindergartens and schools are a useful antidote and a growing branch of education in modern Israel.

As Steiner wrote in *The Philosophy of Freedom*, 1916: "We must find the way back to Her (Nature) again… We have torn ourselves away from Nature, but we must nonetheless have carried away something of her in our own selves. This quality of Nature in us we must seek out, and then we shall discover our connection with her once more."

In Israel, we connect with nature in unlikely places. For example, the Negev desert has a totally different atmosphere to Tel Aviv, so much so that locals say it slows down to *z'man midbar*, meaning 'desert time'. However, maybe 'desert time' is a state of mind that we can all enter, even if we're not in the desert.

Though I believe, maybe delusionally, that time goes faster in the Middle East, I also believe that more people are aware that if we don't slow down, we run the risk of literally losing our lives, and with it our minds and souls. When we get too wrapped-up in our careers, technology and rushing from place to place, we miss out on other aspects of life – family, travel, philosophy or finding meaning.

John Lennon famously sang, "Life is what happens when you're busy making other plans." In Israel, life is what happens when you're busy stuck in traffic jams.

In short, we must find a way to 'pause' time for our own inner peace, and who knows, it could help create some outer peace.

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We Don’t Need No Prime Minister

DEC 19, 2019, 1:28 AM

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Photo by Nicole Baster on Unsplash

As we end the odd year of 2019, Israel has much to reflect on. Two general elections resulted in nothing but months of bickering, rumours and ultimately, no new government. His Holiness President ‘King’ Bibi Netanyahu held onto power for the whole year with the greatest display of time-wasting and political stalling in history.

The Israeli people now face more pointless elections in 2020. This means more election fatigue and less real work being done to improve the country.

Bibi couldn’t form a coalition, neither could Benny Gantz (who won the second election) and many ‘experts’ say the third election will likely bring similar results and another deadlock. If we know the next election is a waste of time and money, then why don’t we simply ignore it?

Think of all the spare time we’ll have. There’ll be no need for months of pointless speculation by overpaid pundits on the television news channels. The writers of satire show *Eretz Nehederet* can take a well-deserved break. Instead, people can watch some football or three-hour Scorsese films. Or even better, read a book, go the ballet or the beach.

Don’t get me wrong. I’m not proposing anarchy. I’m simply proposing that we don’t play the Bibi-Gantz-Lieberman-Bennett game of thrones.

After all, no great damage was done this year by the lack of a real leader. Has it all been a scam? Did we ever really need an interfering Prime Minister?

Local government functions perfectly well without a corrupt national leader. Mayors run the municipalities that make up Israel. Indeed, in Tel Aviv, Ron Huldai is more powerful than Bibi. Big Ron (Mayor of Tel Aviv since 1998) is no angel, but at least the city is finally building its much-needed light rail, getting a huge facelift and introduced all kinds of transport sharing initiatives like Autotel, Bird, Bubble Dan and whatever other app comes next (Bubble Bird, anyone?)

And it goes even further. In my brave new world, environmental issues such as waste disposal, recycling and renewable energy could be taken care of by NGOs.

Education could be left to local educational authorities – there's no need for right-wing religious interference from above. In fact, schools could be autonomous. Today in Israel there are excellent Waldorf or Democratic schools that follow the curriculum but have almost total independence in determining their day-to-day activities and style of learning.

Healthcare can be run by doctors and medical experts instead of nonsense politicians with an agenda. Imagine that – people that actually studied medicine and cared for the sick deciding what direction healthcare takes.

I know what you're thinking – but who will decide on the budgets and finances? Well, that's easy, we'll bring in some economic genius like Stanley Fischer (former governor of the Bank of Israel). Big decisions will be made via a collegium of leaders from health, education, environment and other departments.

Who will meet other world leaders? Well, we have President Reuvlin Rivlin for now. He's got a friendly face and can shake hands, that's about all that's needed for a mostly ceremonial role like the Queen of England. Maybe we could ask popular celebs like Gal Gadot to step in sometimes. I can see the headlines now: 'Wonder Woman Makes World Peace'.

Likewise, Masterchef Eyal Shani can run the army – at least he'll ensure all IDF soldiers get a nutritious meal (albeit in a pita). Author David Grossman can be in charge of Culture, replacing Miri Regev who is demoted to the more suitable Ministry of Animals. And outspoken TV presenter Rotem Sela can be interior minister, just because it'll annoy Bibi.

Oh, the peace process, nearly forgot about that. If Bibi and Abbas can't sit down for peace talks, then maybe ordinary people and businessmen can just get on with the groundwork of forging real alliances. Israeli business could support Palestinian business and vice versa. It's in both people's interest to cut the Palestinian unemployment rate. Businessmen like Bashar Masri, a Palestinian-American billionaire, could be one partner. Plus, it's well-known that there are thousands of skilled Palestinian graduates who can help fill the Israeli hi-tech employment gap.

Yep, we've got it all covered. Bibi, Lieberman and even Gantz, we don't need you. You can keep holding election after election, but the people have chosen themselves. And just like Pink Floyd's 'The Wall', we'll sing: "We don't need no Coalition. Hey! Bibi, leave us all alone."

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Coronavirus is an Opportunity for Opportunists

MAR 24, 2020, 11:34 PM

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Coronavirus is a disaster. We all know that. So far this outbreak has caused sickness, death, isolation, depression and anxiety (for some), unemployment (for many), closure of small businesses and collapse of the economy.

But for some people, although it sounds sickly insensitive to say, it might be the best thing since sliced bread. Let's call these people 'Corona Exploitation Opportunists' (or CEOs, for short).

Opportunist no. 1 is Our Supreme Leader Benjamin 'Bibi' Netanyahu. Good old Bibi never misses an opportunity to cement his power. For Bibi, this chaos is a gift from God. He has used it to delay his trial for bribery and take it out of the media spotlight, probably bring Benny Gantz into an emergency government 'under' his wing and settle a few political scores.

Opportunist no. 2 is defence minister Naftali Bennett. He has been busy showing us all what a 'great' guy he is by injecting a tiny drop of his massive military budget into buying more ventilators. "We're here for you," he says. Thanks Naftali. Let's remember that in elections this time last year, he received a big fat zero mandates. Yet he has managed to worm his way back to the top. National hero? He should be a national zero.

Opportunist no. 3 is the Shin Bet (Israel's internal security force) who have now got the green light to tap our phones, digitally 'track' citizens and generally invade our privacy in new ways. Of course, keeping quarantine is important, but so is keeping our free speech. Let's hope the Coronavirus doesn't tear apart our civil liberties in the long-term.

This pandemic has torn apart tourism. Maybe momentarily, maybe permanently. Airlines, hotels, restaurants, tours, souvenir shops and even guidebook publishers like Lonely Planet have been hit hard. This is sad news for travellers. Indeed, travelling is one of the best ways to experience different cultures, but it can also be a huge environmental disaster. With less flights and pollution, some say the planet is cooling off and taking a well-earned 'breather'.

Perhaps, Corona is a tough lesson for us all. With so many of us affected by a health crisis, it's clear that health services should be a priority. In normal times, health is not a priority. Trillions of dollars are spent on arms and defence, much more than health. Coronavirus has exposed the lack of hospital beds, nurses and basic medical resources needed. It's also exposed how dependant we are on schools, day care and teachers. Generally, doctors, nurses and teachers receive much lower salaries than developers in hi-tech. Our entire economy is geared towards perpetual growth and not sustainability of its main resource – the people.

This is the real opportunity of Corona. If Coronavirus could have its own marketing campaign – what would be its slogans? People over profits. Workers over Wall St. Medicine over the military. Nurses over numbers. Doctors over digits. Invest in care, not in shares.

The same could be said for education: Kids over cash. Teachers over tech. Education over exploitation. These are not extremist slogans of a socialist manifesto, just a wake up call for a more compassionate way of running society.

But when the worst of Coronavirus is over, our governments and corporations won't be selling these slogans. It'll be back to business as usual. It'll be profits over people. So to make a shift for a fairer society that truly values heath and education, the people will need to be proactive. We'll all need to be optimistic opportunists.

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Lo Ba Li – Raising Kids in Israel

SEP 22, 2020, 3:38 PM

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Jelly fish – beautiful creatures that can ruin your summer by the beach. Photo by Sara Santandrea on Unsplash

Anyone who has raised a child in Israel is familiar with the phrase, "*Lo ba li*". It literally means, "Not coming to me," in Hebrew and is like saying, "I don't feel like it," in English.

It's often said after you've told your kids to tidy up their toys, go somewhere they don't want to or, most commonly, about food they don't like. "*Lo ba li Abba*", is a phrase I've come to live with along with "*Di, Abba*", meaning "Stop" or "Shut up, Dad." Yep, Israeli kids kind of run the show.

Us adults, whether parents or teachers, try to take control but often fail and eventually give in to our children's wishes. Because we love them. Because they're the boss. Because *lo ba li*.

Before I became a Dad some eight years ago, I knew that bringing up kids in modern-day Israel would be different to my own childhood experiences in England. But nobody told me that I'd have to regularly deal with the three plagues – *Kinim, Yitoshim & Tolaim* (head lice, mosquitoes and threadworms).

Let me explain, as a kid in England I recall having head lice once and being sent home from school until it was treated. So, when my daughter got head lice at the age of two-and-a half, I was horrified. I immediately bought the best stainless-steel detector comb I could find and some special rosemary shampoo. When we returned to the *gan* (kindergarten) a couple of days later and told the kindergarten teacher about this terrible affliction, she simply laughed and said almost all the kids here deal with lice on a daily basis. Daily basis!

Little did I know that Israel's hot and humid climate makes it a melting pot for spreading head lice. Over the years we found out that whenever we 'dealt' with the lice and finally got rid of them after days of screaming and combing at bath times, the little buggers returned a week later. Why? Because other parents didn't see it as a problem and some were pretty lax about lice. I guess, when you've got Syria, Lebanon and Gaza on your doorstep, head lice is a pretty small problem.

Then the threadworms came. These disgusting microscopic white worms caused my daughter many sleepless and itchy nights. Like the lice, it's pretty common for Israeli kids to have worms. They thrive in the heat and mostly affect kids that eat sweet food and play in the dirt (which is basically all they do at *gan*).

But my horror story doesn't end there. On top of the head lice and worms, there's no shortage of nasty mosquitoes. As I've found out, an innocent picnic in the playground with your kids can end up with some red ants feasting on your baby's flesh.

That's not to mention the evil-looking flying cockroaches, diseased street cats, territorial giant crows, and swarms of jellyfish that mean you can't swim in the sea for most of the summer. I'm not going to mention the dog excrement everywhere in Tel Aviv that seems to attract curious children.

Basically, being a parent in Israel is not easy. You need to have eyes in the back of your head. You need to be an expert on medicine and know a bit about alternative herbal remedies too. And all this is without the added complication of Coronavirus, closing schools and managing your kid's social calendar (a full-time job in 2020).

Aside from the self-entitled *"Lo ba li"* attitude instilled in kids from an early age, it seems that mother nature herself is out to get you. What makes it worse, is that I love spending time in nature. In fact, I often fantasize about bringing up my kids in the rural English countryside. I envisage some four-bedroom house with a huge garden, surrounded by green fields, woodland and a freshwater lake.
It's my 'Downton Abbey Abba' moment.

Yes, I think to myself, we could be a self-sufficient family and grow our own lettuce and tomatoes, take long walks in the hills and find some isolated trees under which to while away an afternoon.

But then I remember my own childhood in a village in England, which was mostly enjoyable, but sometimes soul-crushingly boring. I begin to recall seamlessly endless days of drizzly rain, the dread of a harsh English school, depressing soap operas on TV, gangs of *chavs* (we used to call them Garys' & Lees') running through trains spitting chewing gum and the ominous threat of violence.

After a while, I convince myself that all the lice, mosquitoes and worms are worth it. Despite the hell it causes us parents in Israel – all the stress, endless trips to Superharm, and combing of lice every night – the kids themselves are generally happy. Most of their life is spent outdoors, playing with friends, going to the beach, eating Bamba or ice cream, and if something comes along to burst their bubble, they simply say "*Lo ba li*".

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It’s Time to Help Vaccinate the Palestinian People

JAN 29, 2021, 6:23 PM

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Picture by Jon Tyson

Israel, leading the global coronavirus vaccination drive, should now give the Covid-19 vaccine to the Palestinians.

It’s in Israel’s own interest that the Palestinian people, starting with their essential workers, sick and elderly, are vaccinated.

Why? Firstly, because 200,000 to 300,000 Palestinians (numbers vary depending on the source) work in Israel every day.

Secondly, why would any country want the virus on its doorstep?

Thirdly, this is an opportunity for Israel to help our Palestinian brothers and sisters. That’s right, brothers and sisters, it really is like family.

And just like a family that puts differences aside when there is a crisis or illness, Israel should leave its ego aside and just deliver the vaccine. Israel’s fortune is intertwined with its neighbours – a healthy, stable and educated Palestinian population is good for both sides.

The noises coming out of the current Israeli government that, “Palestinians need to fend for themselves,” or that “Israel is not obligated to help”, are not helpful and display a downright stubbornness and misunderstanding of the situation.

I’m not saying that providing the vaccination to Palestinian people will heal all wounds and all the blood of past wars will be forgotten. Far from it, administering the vaccination should have nothing to do with peace or politics, or receiving some kind of reward, it’s just a basic issue of human rights.

Vaccination Not Annexation

I’m not aware of the logistics of such an operation and it may be that the Palestinian Authority would block any outside help from Israel’s health services, but if it’s at all possible, then it should be done. And as soon as possible.

If health workers entering the West Bank or Gaza is not feasible, then perhaps providing a temporary vaccination camp on the borders could be a solution.

The PA said a month ago that they are securing the vaccination from different sources. One is Russia, another is COVAX, the international effort for developing countries. However, corruption is rife in the PA and often foreign aid doesn't get to where it's needed; it's said that it could be months before they reach even 20% of the population.

Yet, Israel is supposed to be a 'light unto the nations', and this is a moment to shine. Although at the time of writing, Israel still has a high infection rate, in broad terms, there is a light at the end of the tunnel.

Thanks to a well-organised health system and a relatively small population, more than 40 per cent of Israelis (including Arabs who live in Israel) have already received the vaccination. It is by far the highest rate in the world.

I hope that Israel will come to its senses soon, and extend this fortune to its neighbours. After vaccinating Israelis and Palestinians, perhaps it could help other nations that are struggling to vaccinate their populations.

Anyone who has spent time in an Israeli hospital will know that they are places without cultural boundaries – filled with Arab and Israeli doctors, nurses, patients, and visitors. But this is something the global media doesn't show. Similarly, helping the Palestinians fight Covid-19, should not turn into a photo-shoot. It's simply the right thing to do.

Tikun HaOlam – to fix the world – is an integral part of Judaism. The stubbornness, selfishness and bragging needs to stop – it's time to share.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dan Savery Raz is a Lonely Planet author, and has written for BBC.com, Time Out & various websites. Born in England, he lives in Tel Aviv with his wife & children.

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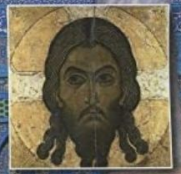

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FROM THE EDITORS OF BBC HISTORY MAGAZINE

SPC SPECIALS

A mosaic of the Virgin Mary and child from the Basilica of the Annunciation in Nazareth (see page 38)

Treasures *of the* Holy Land

In every era, emperors and kings have been allured by the Holy Land. This small strip of land has been conquered by the Babylonians, Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Crusaders, Ottomans and the British empire, to name but a few. Each conquest made its mark, leaving behind many historic sites of significance. **DAN SAVERY RAZ** picks out ten of the most inspiring

CORBIS / REX FEATURES

1 Avdat Negev

The home of the nomadic Nabataean tribe in the middle of the Negev desert

After Petra, Avdat was the second-most important stopping point on the network of lucrative spice and incense routes at one time spanning the Roman empire, the Middle East, north-east Africa and Asia. The Nabataeans, an Arab tribe who spoke Aramaic, the lingua franca of the time, built the city in the 3rd-century BC. Despite the harsh desert conditions, the Nabataeans developed a sophisticated system of irrigation here and even cultivated grapes for wine. Avdat, also known as Obodat and named after the Nabatean monarch Obodos II, was annexed by the Romans for its trade potential and flourished in the Byzantine period until it was deserted after an earthquake in AD 630.

Probably the best-preserved Nabataean ruins in Israel (others include Mamshit and Shivta), Avdat boasts a Roman bathhouse, catacombs, several Byzantine churches and an ancient winepress, it was also the location forthe filming of Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Jesus Christ Superstar* movie.

Avadat was the second-most important stopping point on the lucrative spice route between Rome and India

AKG IMAGES

The impressive ruins of Avdat were declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 2005

2 The Basilica of the Annunciation Nazareth

Nazareth's most notable landmark is the largest church in the Middle East

The Basilica of the Annunciation looms large over the city of Nazareth in northern Israel. This vast hillside structure was built on what the Catholic Church believes to be Mary's childhood house, the location where she received the message she would give birth to Jesus. The original shrine, a small chapel built in a cave, was built in the mid-4th century. The Crusaders built a larger church here, which was destroyed by the Mamluks in 1260 and the Franciscans later built a small structure to enclose the grotto.

The current basilica was consecrated in 1969 and incorporates the earlier lower-level Byzantine-era grotto. Its dome is shaped to resemble a white lily and its courtyard walls display multicultural portrayals of Mary cradling Jesus. In Greek Orthodox tradition, the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary while she was collecting water from a well and the Greek church is built at an alternate location on the other side of the city.

Saturday mass in the Basilica, as continues to be practised today

3 Caesarea northern Israel

Herod's hub by the sea was home to the Indianapolis of ancient Rome

Once a great port of the Mediterranean to rival Alexandria, Caesarea was the Roman capital of the Syria Palaestina province. Under King Herod's rule, a grandiose city was built for Augustus Caesar with a temple, palace, theater, amphitheater and markets. Completed after 12 years of back-breaking labor, Caesarea opened for business (and pleasure) in 10 BC. Famous for its ancient hippodrome—the Indianapolis of its day—this was where chariot races and public tortures entertained up to 10,000 spectators.

The city flourished in the Byzantine period, until it was mostly destroyed in AD 640 by the Arab conquest. In the 12th century, the Crusaders took the city and discovered a green-glass chalice they mistakenly believed to be the Holy Grail, now kept in Genoa, Italy. Today, Caesarea is a national park with arches, pillars and mosaics surrounding the hippodrome, while the southern amphitheater has been restored and is now used for concerts.

The southern amphitheater at Caesaria still sees active service, as the venue for numerous music concerts every year

CORBIS

It may not be the prettiest church in the world, but the Holy Sepulchre is one of the busiest

A young boy is bathed in sunlight as he watches the Palm Sunday procession in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre

4 Church of the Holy Sepulchre Jerusalem

This is believed to be the location of Jesus's crucifixion and burial in Jerusalem

Out of all the churches in Jerusalem, and there's plenty of them, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre is considered the holiest. Hidden in a labyrinth of narrow alleyways in the old city, it houses the final five of the 14 Stations of the Cross, the series of images of Christ's crucifixion.

The Holy Sepulchre is one of three major churches founded by Helena, the mother of Emperor Constantine, who traveled to the Holy Land some 300 years after the crucifixion; the other two churches are located in Bethlehem and Nazareth. Helena declared the site to be Calvary (derived from the Latin word for 'skull') when the grave of Joseph of Arimathea and three crosses were found during excavations.

The original church was completed in AD 335, though most of what stands today dates from the Crusader period church, restored in 1810. While not the prettiest church, it is one of the world's busiest, with thousands of tourists lighting candles near the rock tomb and regular processions held by Coptic, Greek Orthodox and Franciscan monks.

REX FEATURES

5 The Western Wall, Jerusalem

Israel's rock of ages remains the most sacred site in the Jewish faith

At first glimpse, the Western Wall, called HaKotel in Hebrew, looks just like any other fortress wall. Yet, for 2,000 years it was the symbol of Jewish yearning. The exact origins of the wall are a hotly debated topic, but this is said to be where King Solomon built the original Temple of the Israelites, destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BC and rebuilt 70 years later. The Romans burned down the Second Temple in AD 70, leaving only a supporting wall which, during the Jewish exile, became a place of pilgrimage where Jews would lament the destruction of the Temple, earning it the nickname the 'Wailing Wall'. Only in 1967, when the modern state of Israel defeated Jordan, Egypt and Syria in the Six Day War, did Israeli paratroopers regain access to the Western Wall. Today, it is a place of prayer, open to all faiths, yet heavily secured.

GETTY IMAGES

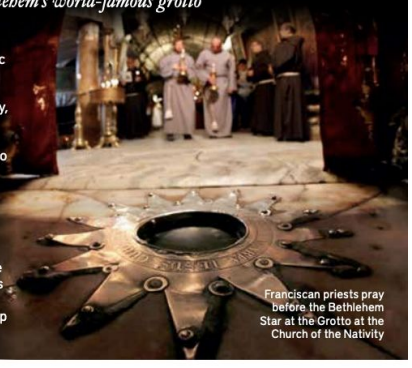
At the Western Wall, more than 50,000 Jewish worshippers attend the annual priestly blessing during the Passover holiday

6 The Church of the Nativity Bethlehem

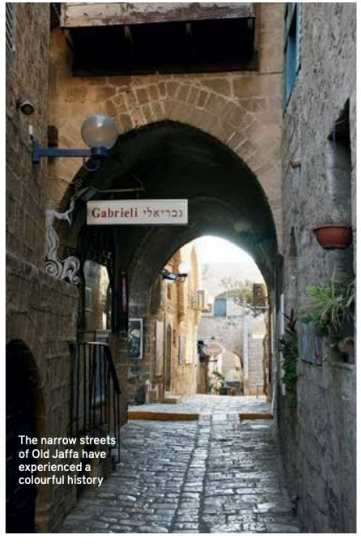
It feels like Christmas every day at Bethlehem's world-famous grotto

Whether or not this is the birthplace of Jesus, the Church of the Nativity is a remarkable heritage site. It's the oldest continuously operating church in the world, commissioned in AD 326 by Helena, Emperor Constantine's mother. Constantine famously converted to Christianity, thus changing the face of the Roman empire.

Like many other historic sites in this part of the world, it is a mish-mash of Byzantine, Crusader and modern architecture. Inside, it includes the remains of Constantine's original 4th-century mosaic floor, along with red-and-white limestone columns dating from the 6th century, when Emperor Justinian rebuilt the church. Popular with tour groups, the Grotto of the Nativity has a 14-pointed silver star where Jesus was said to have been born. Although situated in the troubled West Bank region, the church is still a major place of pilgrimage for Christians and world leaders; Barack Obama made a whistle-stop here in 2013.



Franciscan priests pray before the Bethlehem Star at the Grotto at the Church of the Nativity



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The narrow streets of Old Jaffa have experienced a colourful history

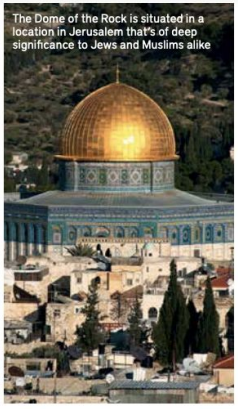
7 Old Jaffa near Tel Aviv

The Biblical port that's seen ships come and go for more than 4,000 years

Legend has it that Old Jaffa, called Joppa in the Bible, was founded and named after Japeth, son of Noah. Jaffa is mentioned in the Bible (2 Chronicles 2:16) as the place where cedar trees of Lebanon were imported to build Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem. The town was later conquered by the Assyrians, Persians and Hellenistic empires, although was neglected by the Romans who built a new port in Caesarea. Notable sights in Jaffa include an underground Hellenistic-era excavation site, Simon the Tanner's House (where St Peter restored Tabitha to life in the New Testament) and St Peter's Monastery, a Franciscan church built in the 1890s on the ruins of the Crusader citadel.

In recent years, the port's empty shipping hangars (once home to Jaffa oranges) have been redeveloped as cafés, shops and art galleries, where Jews and Arabs exist peacefully together.

The port is now a hub of cafés and shops where Jews and Arabs exist peacefully together



The Dome of the Rock is situated in a location in Jerusalem that's of deep significance to Jews and Muslims alike

8 Dome of the Rock Jerusalem

The golden shrine that shines all over the world

Aside from being one of the most photographed and eye-catching buildings on earth, the Dome of the Rock (Qubbet al-Sakhra in Arabic) is all about location. Built atop the Temple Mount, Jews believe this was the site where Abraham bound his son Isaac as a sacrifice to God, while Muslims claim this was the spot where the Prophet Muhammad ascended into heaven. Underneath the dome lies the rock which, according to the Quran, wanted to join Muhammad in heaven and rose from the ground.

The Dome was built between AD 688 and 691 under the rule of the caliph Abd al-Malik Ibn Marwan to compete with the Christian Church of the Holy Sepulchre. The original golden dome was melted down to pay debts and King Hussein of Jordan donated the 1.3mm of gold that covers the entire roof today. Like Mecca, the Dome of the Rock is not a mosque but a shrine. Entry is only allowed for Muslims.

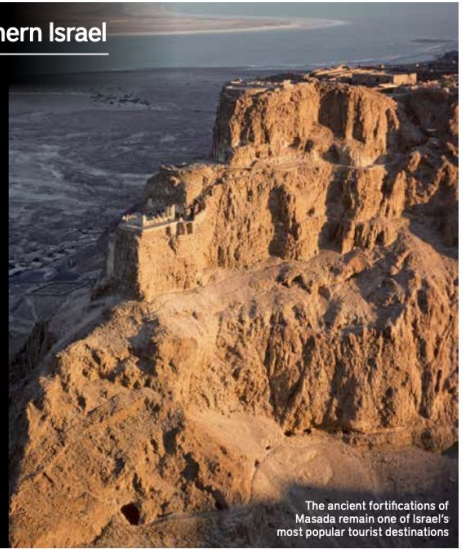
The building's original gold dome was melted down to pay off the debts of a past sultan

9 Masada southern Israel

Mystical mountain-top ruins overlooking the Dead Sea

Many a tale has been told about Masada, a red-rock mountain in the Judean desert synonymous with perhaps the most famous mass suicide in history. Herod the Great built palaces on top of this isolated rocky plateau and fortified it around 31 BC. It was overcome by a group of Jewish zealots (known as sikrikim in Hebrew) in AD 66. In AD 73, after the Romans had destroyed most of Jerusalem, almost 1,000 sikrikim made their last stand at Masada.

Surrounded by the Roman empire's X Legion, they chose to die rather than become slaves. When the Romans reached the top of the mountain, they found everyone dead, except for two women and five children. Masada now has a museum exhibiting Roman artefacts and a laser-light show at night. Visitors can either climb the mountain at sunrise or choose to take the easier cable-car option.



The ancient fortifications of Masada remain one of Israel's most popular tourist destinations

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10 Nebi Shu'eib near Tiberias

Jethro's tomb and the battlefield where the Crusaders were crushed

Less familiar than many of the other treasures of the Holy Land, Nebi Shu'eib has an extraordinary story nonetheless. The most sacred place for the modern Druze tribe, an Arab sect separate from Islam, Nebi Shu'eib is said to house the traditional tomb of Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses, who they believe to be the founder of monotheism.

Inside, the chamber housing the tomb dates back to the 3rd century, although most of the current building is from 1880. It was built at the foot of the imposing "Horns of Hattin" rock formation overlooking Lake Galilee where, in 1187, Saladin, the first Sultan of Egypt and Syria, defeated the Crusaders. The loss of this battle brought about the 1st Kingdom of Jerusalem's collapse and triggered the Third Crusade.

Today, the site resembles a large mosque with a courtyard and is a spectacular vantage point for hikers in the Galilee region. ■

A less familiar Holy Land treasure, Nebi Shu'eib still has an extraordinary story

Nabi Shueib is believed to be the location of the tomb of Jethro, Moses' father-in-law

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The Negev desert wine route

This dry and arid region in southern Israel is home to a burgeoning wine scene, thanks to a group of pioneering 21st-century farmers and their use of computerized drip irrigation.

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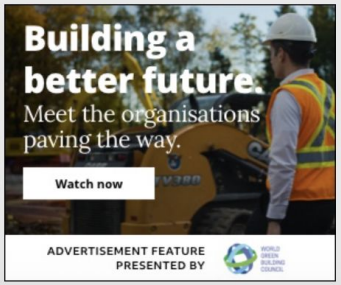

By Dan Savery Raz
27 February 2012

By Dan Savery Raz
27 February 2012

Like most Middle Eastern deserts, the Negev is usually associated with sand, rock and the odd camel. However, this seemingly dry and arid region in southern Israel is now home to a burgeoning wine route, thanks to a group of pioneering 21st-century farmers and their use of computerized drip irrigation.

- **Related article: Canada's wine scene is taking root**

The Negev gets less than 100mm of rain per year, most of which is washed away in flash floods down mountainsides, so the use of irrigation is not necessarily new. The Nabataeans – the ancient desert nomads who built their capital in Petra in the Hellenistic period – were so good at conserving water that their kings used to deliberately waste it in front of guests to show off. You can still see traces of their ancient irrigation systems at the ruined cities of **Shivta** and **Mamshit** in the Negev. The Romans, who later controlled this region, were also partial to a drop of wine. Indeed, the ruins of **Avdat** even include an old Byzantine wine press.

But modern drip irrigation uses underground computerized probes and long plastic tubes to slowly release water over long distances. Today, this efficient method is used in more than 100 countries to grow crops using less water, energy and fewer chemicals, including projects in South Africa, China, India and even for growing tea in Tanzania.

Polish-born Simcha Blass is credited with introducing new "spaghetti tubes" to Israel in the 1950s, with longer passageways that would not get blocked by small particles. And now, for the first time in centuries, grapevines are taking root in soil that was once considered infertile.

The wine route started in the late 1990s, when Zvi Remak, who studied winemaking at California's Napa Valley College, decided to plant a vineyard on the grounds of the Sde Boker Kibbutz in the northern Negev. The **Sde Boker Winery** opened in 1999, and today specializes in handcrafted red wines made from zinfandel and carignan grapes. The winery is next to the former desert home of Israel's first prime minister David Ben-Gurion, and offers tastings in its small shop.

The **Yatir Winery**, which is close to the Dead Sea and the ancient 3,000-year-old Canaanite settlement of Tel Arad, released its first wines in 2004. Known for its sauvignon blanc and cabernet merlot blends, Yatir achieved meteoric success and was the first Israeli winery to be listed in London's exclusive department store **Selfridges**. The actual vineyard is located in the Yatir Forest underneath the Judean hills, the biggest planted forest in Israel, where you will find carob, pistachio and pine trees.

Most of the Negev desert wineries are located along Route 40, between the city of Be'er Sheva and the hilltop town of Mitzpe Ramon. Maps are available at the Negev Highlands tourist office.

Heading south on Route 40, the **Boker Valley Vineyard** has an excellent wine lodge and restaurant, as well as a farm store that sells wines and olive oil. The vineyard is run by a friendly Israeli-Dutch couple and offers accommodation in its modern, South African-style wooden cabins. An outdoor jacuzzi in the desert valley is the perfect place to sip champagne and watch the sunset.

Further south still, just before the town of Mitzpe Ramon and opposite the ruined Nabataean city of Avdat , the **Carmey Avdat Winery** is a family-run, ecological farm that cultivates grapes using ancient irrigation terraces. The winery produces fine merlots with a unique, salty desert taste, and they also offer bed and breakfast in six luxurious rooms.

Located 60km north of Eilat in the Arava valley, **Neot Semadar** ("Neot" means "oasis" in Hebrew) is the southernmost winery in Israel. This alternative organic farm and vineyard sells its own range of boutique wines, olive oils, jams, homemade ice cream and cheeses in its rustic roadside restaurant surrounded by desert terrain.

*Dan Savery Raz is co-author of Lonely Planet's **Israel & the Palestinian Territories** guide.*

The article **'The Negev desert wine route'** was published in partnership with **Lonely Planet**.

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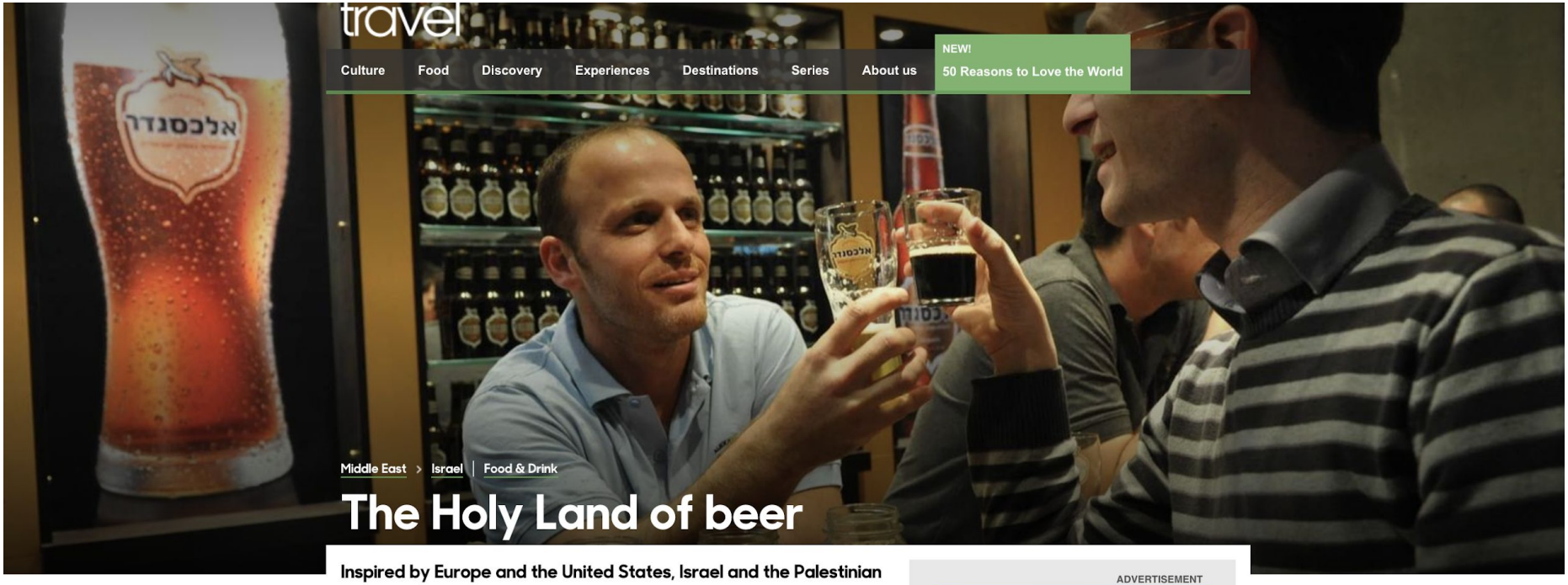

The Holy Land of beer

Inspired by Europe and the United States, Israel and the Palestinian territories have become a hub for boutique microbreweries and gastropubs.

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By Dan Savery Raz
18 June 2012

Large crowds of people stand outside the pub, chatting and clinking beer glasses -- but this is not St Patrick's Day in Dublin or Oktoberfest in Munich; it is just a regular Thursday night in Tel Aviv.

- **Related article: The Negev desert wine route**

Inspired by Europe and the United States, the Israeli city is fast becoming a hub for gastropubs and boutique breweries, and many pub menus are filling up with local beers. In fact, new micro-breweries are opening all over Israel, turning the "land of milk and honey" into the "land of malt and hops".

West Bank story

The biggest brewery in Israel is Tempo, based in the seaside town of Netanya. Part-owned by Heineken, they have dominated Israel's beer market since the 1950s with their **Goldstar** and **Maccabee** beers.

However, in the mid-'90s competition came from the unlikeliest of places – the West Bank. Founded by Nadim Khoury, who studied the art of brewing in California in the 1980s, **Taybeh** is the first and only Palestinian brewery.

Situated 12km north of Ramallah and 30km northeast of Jerusalem, the village of Taybeh sits atop one of the highest hills in the Jordan Valley. It is widely visible thanks to its three church towers and the ruins of a crusader castle built by the Boniface de Montferrat from Italy. But today, its biggest draw is the locally-brewed beer.

Although alcohol is forbidden in Islam, the 1,500 residents of Taybeh can produce and sell beer as it is an all-Christian village. The Koury family are rightly proud of their German-style beer, which is made without any additives or preservatives. The brewery runs free daily tours (except Sunday) including tastings of their golden, light, amber and dark ales. The village even has its own **Taybeh Oktoberfest**, held on the first weekend of October.

Beer has no borders, and Taybeh has proved to be a surprising hit in Israeli bars, particularly in Jaffa and Tel Aviv. Indeed, more than 40% of Taybeh's sales are within neighbouring Israel, and this tiny Palestinian beer seems to have kick-started a micro-brewing trend.

An American ale

Over the past decade, a rising number of American immigrants have brought their love of beer to Israel. The first microbrewery in Israel, **Dancing Camel**, was opened in Tel Aviv's Yad Harutzim industrial area in 2006 by New Jersey-native David Cohen, who left a business career to follow his dream to make quality beer.

It is not surprising that Dancing Camel beer has a distinctly American taste and mixes ingredients like date honey, bittersweet chocolate or even cherry vanilla in its pale ales and stouts. More than a brewery, Dancing Camel is a huge warehouse-style pub complete with decorative barrels, live sports screens and occasional keg parties. Their beers are sold all over Israel in specialist pubs and the brewery takes part in the **Jerusalem Beer Festival**, held annually at the end of summer in the city's old train station.

Another American, Jeremy Waltfeld, quit his job at the White House in Washington DC to start his own brew house in the town of Petah Tikva, 10km east of Tel Aviv. **Jems Beer Factory** sells its own range of fresh ales, stouts and wheat beers along with hearty pub grub such as fish 'n' chips and homemade kosher sausages.

Let there be lager

Hot on the heels of the Americans, came **Alexander**, an Israeli brewery that opened in 2008 and quickly became a favourite in restaurants and bars. A bona fide boutique brewery, It makes two main beers – Blonde, a Belgian-style fruity beer, and Amber, a French country-style beer made from special roasted malts. Alexander also offers two seasonal beers: Green, with an Israeli twist of grapefruit, guava and mango, and Black with dark chocolate and espresso.

Alexander is located in the Hefer Valley, a small green belt of kibbutzim slightly inland from Netanya and south of Haifa. The brewery was named after the nearby Alexander stream by founder Ori Sagy, a former Israeli Air Force pilot who brewed beer as a hobby for more than 25 years. The brewery welcomes visitors with a 45-minute tour of the brew house, which includes beer tastings.

Just north of the Hefer Valley in the Carmel Mountains is the charming rustic town of Zichron Ya'akov. Known for its famous wineries, the town is also home to **Pavo**, a brewery set in a Tuscan-style building that comprises a visitor's centre, tasting bar and an impressive balcony with views of the Mediterranean below.

Scattered elsewhere around the country are even smaller micro breweries such as Asif in Ramot Haftali and **Malka** in Kibbutz Yechiam, both in the Galilee region, **Lone Tree** in the Judean Mountains and **Negev** in Kiryat Gat in the southern desert. But if lacking time, the best place to sample many of these local brews is **Porter & Sons** in Tel Aviv. Although they do not produce their own brew, this pub has the biggest collection of beer in the country, with more than 50 types on tap including both local brews and imported beers. Whatever you drink, be sure to say *LeChaim*, which means "to life" in Hebrew, a pleasant way to say "cheers".

*Dan Savery Raz is co-author of Lonely Planet's **Israel and the Palestinian Territories guide**.*

The article **'The Holy Land of beer'** was published in partnership with **Lonely Planet**.

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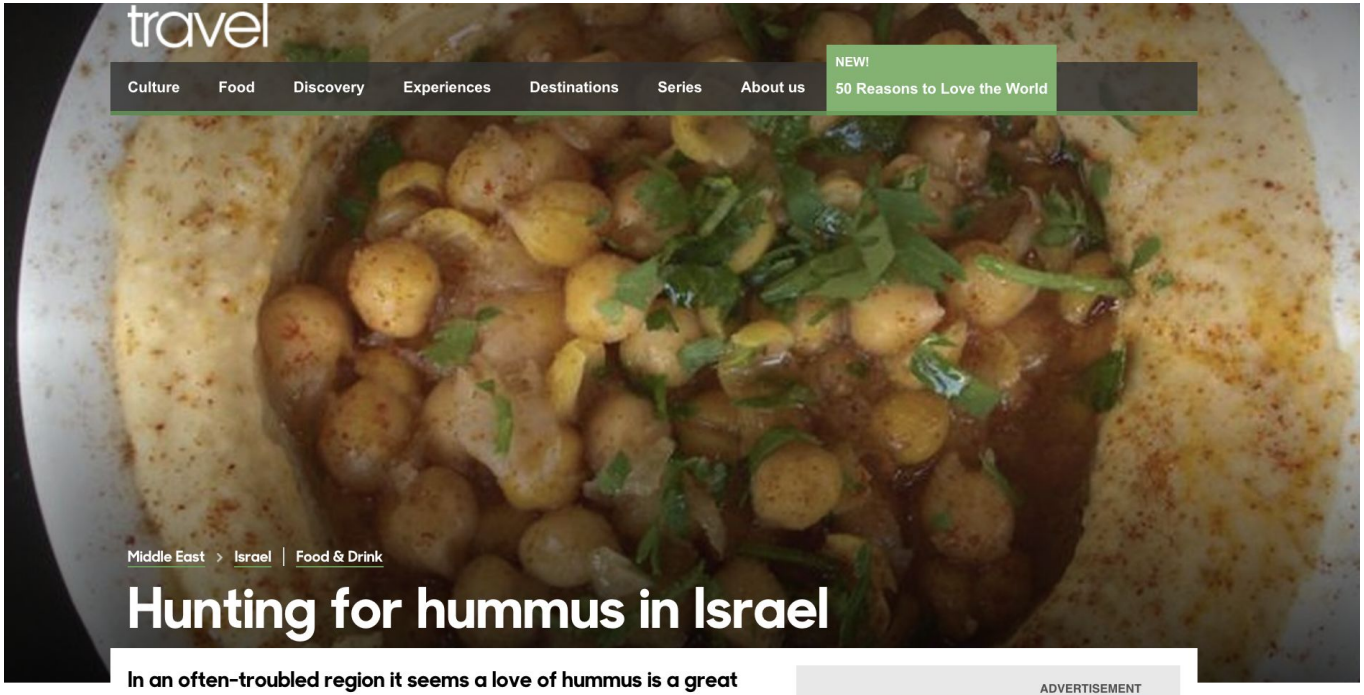

Hunting for hummus in Israel

In an often-troubled region it seems a love of hummus is a great unifier, with each local community putting a unique spin on the humble chickpea.

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By Dan Savery Raz
1 August 2012

By Dan Savery Raz
1 August 2012

Tubs of hummus – cooked, mashed chickpeas mixed with garlic, olive oil and lemon -- fill refrigerators all over the globe, but where can the best be found? One contender for the gold medal is Israel, where, despite political differences, locals have embraced this Arabic dish as their own.

- **Related article: The Holy Land of beer**

Although the origin of hummus (which simply means “chickpea” in Arabic), is unclear, people have been consuming this thick savoury paste for millennia in the Middle East. Medieval recipe books show it was eaten in Egypt and the Levant (Palestine, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon) before spreading to Turkey, Greece and across the Mediterranean.

Since then, it has become the basis of an entire food culture in Israel. In fact, according to Israel-based hummus manufacturer **Sabra Salads**, Israelis consume twice as much hummus as their Arab neighbours. The most popular version of hummus in Israel is served warm in a large bowl, sprinkled with parsley, cumin and other spices. It has the consistency of a very thick soup and is scooped up with hot pita bread, raw onion and pickled cucumbers. In Palestinian areas, hummus is usually served at breakfast, sometimes accompanied with *labaneh* (cold yoghurt) and fresh mint leaves. Indeed, many of the Arab hummus eateries are only open until 2 pm each day, following the traditional Arabic saying that “kings eat hummus in the morning”, referring to the tradition of cooking a pot of chickpeas overnight and savouring the freshest portion at dawn.

Israel originally adopted hummus as its unofficial national dish because it suited Jewish Kashrut laws -- religious rules that deal with eating and food preparation. Religious Jews buy only kosher-certified products and they separate their meat and dairy foods. Since hummus complements vegetarian, dairy and meat dishes, it became a popular choice, and over time, has become much more than just a dip.

“We have such a deep respect for the dish in Israel that there are eateries around the country devoted to serving just hummus,” explained Inbal Baum, founder of the tour company **Delicious Israel**, which offers culinary and speciality boutique walks, including popular guided “hummus crawls” in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. "There are so many varieties of hummus developed in Israel based on ethnic tradition and local style that you could easily spend a long weekend touring just for hummus. Many Israelis trace their roots back to Arabic-speaking countries, and this fusion is reflected in their creative cuisine."

The humble dish of hummus represents, quite literally, the melting pot of Israeli culture. In the last century, Jewish immigrants from countries such as Iraq, Yemen and Morocco each brought with them their own unique hummus habits. For example, Iraqis serve hummus with *sabich* (fried eggplant and boiled eggs) while Moroccans prefer *Hasa Al Hummus*, a vegetarian chickpea soup.

In more recent decades, Israel has received a growing number of African immigrants and today there is even a Sudanese hummus joint in Tel Aviv called Hummus Gan Eden (46 Yona Ha'Navi Street; 972-03-510-2230). Their African-flavoured menu features Special Hummus Darfur, which adds egg, tomato and grated cheese to the mix.

Yet, to find an authentic family-run *hummusia* (an eatery devoted solely to hummus) in Israel you need to be in the know. Most traditional hummus places are housed in old buildings, often hidden down alleyways and with signs only in Hebrew or Arabic. It seems the really good places do not need to advertise, as word-of-mouth reviews bring in the crowds.

A good place to start your hummus hunt is in Tel Aviv's Yemenite Quarter. This sleepy old-fashioned neighbourhood in the centre of town, footsteps away from the bustling **Carmel Market**, was originally inhabited by Jewish immigrants from Yemen. Its narrow lanes play host to a number of hummus and soup kitchens such as Achim Aziri (30 Yihye Street, 972-03-516-0783), which serves hummus hot with *skhug* (a traditional Yemenite-style spicy sauce made from red or green peppers).

For a slice of Jamaica, head to one of the liveliest little eateries in town, Hummus Abu Dhabi (81 King George Street; 972-03-525-9090). Reggae music is popular with young Israelis, so it makes sense that this place mixes the sounds of Bob Marley with its chickpea offerings.

A few kilometres south of Tel Aviv, in the Ajami neighbourhood of Jaffa, is one of the holiest temples of hummus. The much-revered Ali Caravan (1 Dolphin Street; 972-03-682-8255), also known as "Abu Hassan", has been a place of pilgrimage since opening in 1966. Everyday, queues of people wait patiently, and impatiently, for warm plates of *masabacha* – a type of hummus that is recognisable by its red colour, thanks to the added paprika. Abu Hassan, the owner and the local master of masabacha, is so popular that a few imitation Abu Hassans have opened elsewhere in the country.

Jerusalem also has its fair share of heavenly hummus. Lina (42 Akava El Hanaachah Street; 972-02-627-7230) is a tiny restaurant located in the Old City's Christian Quarter and specialises in delicious no-frills hummus. But locals say Abu Shukri (63 Al-Wad Road, 972-02-627-1538) has the best hummus in the Holy City. Its thick and creamy dip is so loved that Jordanians order giant frozen tubs of it from across the border.

Around 10km west of Jerusalem, the town of Abu Ghosh has been dubbed the "Capital of Hummus" by the Guinness Book of Records, once holding the world record for the **largest dish of hummus**, which weighed more than four tons, before it was beaten by a town in Lebanon which cooked up 11 tons in May 2010. Although predominantly a Muslim town, Abu Ghosh welcomes Jews and Christians, who come to see the **Church of Notre Dame** -- said to be built on the site where the Ark of the Covenant once rested. No visit here is complete without also going to Abu Ghosh Retaurant (65 HaShalom St; 972-02-533-2019), which has been featured in the **New York Times** and specialises in barbecued kebabs and sliced shwarma meat along with its excellent hummus.

Heading north, the port city of Akko has nearly 30 hummus places, but the most famous is undoubtedly Hummus Said (Old City; 972-04-955-2232), pronounced “Sayeed”. Just a short walk from the sea, Said has a breezy Mediterranean feel offering Greek-style salads with their hummus drenched in olive oil, which is made from the owner's own olive press.

On the outskirts of Akko, the small village of Kfar Yasif is home to Abu Adham (Highway Route 70; 972-04-9996245). One of the most popular *hummusiot* in the country, Israelis have been known to travel hours just to try their famous hummus with *fuul* – a thick paste made from fava beans.

But all this is just a drop in the hummus ocean. Across the northern Galilee region there are dozens of Arab and Druze villages, each offering their own homemade variety. The Druze, an Arab religious tribe separate from Islam, bake uniquely thin pita bread and serve hummus with *za’atar* (hyssop herb), a shrub that grows locally in the Carmel Mountains on the outskirts of Haifa in northern Israel.

Like pasta in Italy, each community adds its own unique flavour to the world of hummus. “While the media often focuses on division in this region, when it comes to delicious food like hummus, the people of the region are quite united,” said Baum. “The only division between Muslims, Jews and Christians is, who is ordering the *masbacha* and who is ordering the *fuul*.” In an often-troubled region, it seems the love of hummus is a great unifier.

The article **'Hunting for hummus in Israel'** was published in partnership with **Lonely Planet**.

Kick back on a kibbutz

From eco villages to rural holiday resorts, one of Israel's most influential ideas has had to change with the times.

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By Dan Savery Raz
8 March 2013

By Dan Savery Raz
8 March 2013

In a country of hi-tech start-ups, the kibbutz remains perhaps the most influential idea to come out of Israel. However, the modern definition of the word, which comes from the Hebrew for "group", is something of an enigma. To some, a kibbutz is a co-operative voluntary community, to others it is an agricultural or industrial village – and to a growing number of travellers, it is an alternative way to kick back and enjoy the country views.

- **Related article: Hunting for hummus in Israel**

A changing way of life

Once associated with communism – people living and working together on a non-competitive basis – many kibbutzim have rebranded themselves as **rural holiday resorts** or eco-villages to ensure they stay relevant in the 21st Century.

Set up in 1927, the **United Kibbutz Movement** was strictly secular. It encouraged equality of the sexes and supported the establishment of the State of Israel. The early *kibbutzniks* (residents) were mostly agricultural workers who received no wage, but also had no rent or bills. The goal was to create an egalitarian, secular community where all meals were shared and everyone played a part in the welfare of the kibbutz. By 1950, more than 67,000 people were living on 214 kibbutzim, 4.5% of the overall population. Today about 106,000 people live on 260 kibbutzim, accounting for just 1.5% of Israel's population.

So what happened to this idyllic way of life? Ze'ev Shabetai, son of one of the founders of **Kibbutz Beit Oren** in the Carmel Mountain forest, said that the big changes started in 1985 when there was economic crisis and hyperinflation. "The government, under Shimon Peres [the current president], introduced the New Israeli Shekel currency and lowered inflation drastically from 450% to 20% to halt the crisis," he explained. "At the same time more than half of the people left the kibbutz [which had become bankrupt]."

Almost overnight, Beit Oren – like many other communities – transformed to become a "renewed kibbutz", changing its whole system from income sharing to differential wages, meaning some received higher salaries than others. Many people no longer felt connected to the original socialist ideology. "This is Israel's *perestroika*," observed Shabetai at the time, comparing it to the opening-up of the former Soviet Union.

Traveller sanctuaries

Kibbutzim have a long tradition of welcoming volunteers from overseas. These travellers usually worked in the fields picking fruit and were rewarded with free accommodation and food, much like the permanent residents. Although people can still register to the **Kibbutz Volunteer Program**, the majority of visitors are now paying guests.

Beit Oren, which literally means "home of the pine", was one of the first to open a guest house in 1942, and it soon became a popular stay for Europeans looking to escape the harsh summer heat in other parts of the country. The Beit Oren Hotel, which is still in operation, has 30 pleasant rooms offering bed and breakfast, as well as a yoga centre and a swimming pool. Guests can visit the nearby city of Haifa, a horse-riding farm, the **Ein Hod** artists' village and go hiking in the forest.

"The kibbutz offers a special way of life," Shabetai said. "The ideology of kibbutzim from the beginning was not only to be agricultural, but it could also be a place of industry and even tourism."

Almost half of Israel's 260 kibbutzim, from the Golan Heights down to the Arava Desert, now offer hotel-style rooms. In fact, most of the kibbutzim around Lake Galilee, a popular tourist destination in the north of Israel, such as **Maagan Eden**, **Ein Gev**, **Lavi** and **Ginosar**, are fully-fledged resorts with heated swimming pools, gyms, spa treatments, wi-fi and multimedia conference rooms. Although the income earned is shared between the families who still live and work on the grounds, the modern creature comforts at these resorts are a world away from the humble back-breaking beginnings of the early kibbutz.

And as trends in travel change, so do kibbutzim. In recent years, more and more kibbutzim have used their magnificent landscapes and open spaces in creative ecological ways. **Kibbutz Bahan** in the Hefer Valley region closed down its old dairy and chicken farms to open the **Utopia Orchid Park**. This covered "rainforest paradise" supports the kibbutz with a botanical garden housing tropical birds, fish ponds and more than 20,000 orchids.

Sustainability in the sand

The ultimate "eco-kibbutz" is **Lotan**, situated in the arid Arava desert, 51km north of the Red Sea resort town of Eilat. Guests can sleep in mud houses and learn about permaculture, sustainable building and geodesic domes on a four-week to four-month English-language "Green Apprenticeship". The kibbutz, set against the backdrop of the red Edom Mountains and the golden sand dunes of the Jordanian border, is a great place to watch birds migrating to and from Africa by day and gaze at the stars by night.

"People are inspired when they see what we've done under tough conditions," said programme director Mark Naveh, who has lived on the kibbutz since 1989. "Lotan is the only kibbutz that is part of the global **eco-village network**. I believe it's a model for sustainable existence, which is going to become more and more necessary as time goes on."

Lotan is also one of just 20% of kibbutzim in Israel that is still a fully co-operative, income-sharing community. "It doesn't matter if you're the manager of the dairy or taking care of the kids or working in the kitchen, everyone gets the same allowance," he explained.

Across the highway, another kibbutz is also endeavouring to make the desert bloom. **Kibbutz Ketura** – a date palm oasis in the sand – opened the Middle East's first solar field in June 2011. Its 20 acres of solar panels, founded by entrepreneurial kibbutz members, is a separate business backed by major corporations including Siemens. The electricity goes into the national grid and provides energy and money for the kibbutz. Ketura is also home to the **Arava Institute for Environmental Studies**, which runs courses on water conservation, sustainable agriculture and renewable energy. Students and travellers can stay at the onsite **Kibbutz Ketura Country Lodging**, comprising 45 modern apartments each with its own kitchen, balcony or lawn.

"The kibbutz has changed vastly in the last decade and a half, from a community dependent solely on agriculture to a diverse, entrepreneurial and innovative economy which still retains its core values of sharing," said Leah Kayman, educator and public relations director at Ketura.

All over Israel, kibbutzim are changing in different ways. A relatively new phenomenon is the rise of the “urban kibbutz”; these co-operative groups, usually found in low demographic areas such as **Kibbutz Tamuz** in the town of Beit Shemesh and **Kibbutz Migvan** in the town of Sderot, are very active in the local community. Members of these urban kibbutzim live on the same street, share their income and contribute to local centres for youth, physical disability and Arab-Jewish coexistence. Although these urban kibbutzim are not hotels, they do indicate a trend in taking the co-operative concept out of the country and into the city.

Shabetai believes the kibbutz will always need to reinvent itself. The LA Times **interviewed him** about the changing kibbutzim back in 1989. And in the future, there will likely be more people asking, “What exactly is a kibbutz?”

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Following the trail

Midway on the Jesus Trail, the Horns of Hattin offers panoramic views of the Galilee region. (David Landis)

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Walking with Jesus in the Galilee

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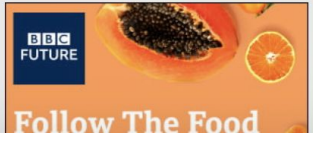

By Dan Savery Raz
21 May 2013

Instead of asking “what would Jesus do?”, travellers from all walks of life are now asking “where did Jesus walk?”.

Founded in 2009, northern Israel’s **Jesus Trail** is fast-becoming one of the world’s great hikes. More than a Christian pilgrimage, the trail is designed for anyone interested in archaeology, history or nature and encourages hikers not to leave an ecological footprint.

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The 65km hike in the Galilee also offers travellers a chance to soak up the regional landscape where it is said Jesus grew up. Spread over four days, with around 15km of hiking per day, the trail starts in the town of Nazareth and ends at the ruins of Capernaum, stopping for reflection at many important Christian sites and passing through local Arab and Jewish villages. In contrast to the usual whirlwind coach tours of the region, the Jesus Trail was designed for slow travel, summed up by their motto, “Jesus didn’t take the bus”.

The Holy Grail of trails

The hike has proved to be very popular, and not just with Christian pilgrims. "Not everyone who hikes practices Christianity," said Maoz Inon, an Israeli tourism entrepreneur who co-founded the Jesus Trail. "Some are just regular hikers who have been to the **Appalachian Trail** or the **Himalayan Trail** and are now enjoying a hike in the Galilee."

But how can we know exactly where Jesus walked? Although there is little to no archaeological evidence connected to Jesus himself, historians can pinpoint certain places mentioned in the Bible. Variations of place names for Nazareth (sometimes called *Natzrat* or *Nazara*), Capernaum (*Kapharnaum*) and Tzippori (*Sepphoris*) appear in biblical texts and in the Talmud, an ancient Jewish rabbinical scripture written in Hebrew and Aramaic. “The trail also crosses an old Roman road from the time of Jesus,” Inon said, “So the chances are that Jesus travelled from Nazareth to Capernaum on these very same stones.”

Inon is a man on a mission. Aside from co-founding the Jesus Trail, he is also the founder of the **Israel Hostels Network**, owner of Jerusalem’s **Abraham Hostel** and Nazareth’s **Fauzi Azar Inn**. For many hikers, the Fauzi Azar Inn – a 200-year-old Arab mansion that is now a gorgeous hostel – is the starting point of the Jesus Trail.

For Inon, tourism can create more than just income, building bridges between different communities. "We want to promote the Middle East as one destination – like Southeast Asia or South America," he said. "My hostels give a free night to any traveller who passed through Syria, Iran, Iraq or Lebanon. Why? Because we believe they are real hardcore travellers."

Inon’s passion for travel was ignited in his 20s, when he went backpacking through Nepal, Australia, New Zealand and South America. During these trips he and his wife Shlomit stayed in many guesthouses, such as Ecuador’s **Black Sheep Inn** and Peru’s **The Way Inn**, and they were inspired by the way they empowered the local community and complemented the natural heritage.

"We realized that none of those sights and places could match the land of the Bible," Inon explained. "So we said to ourselves, we must create a trail that connects the important sites in Christianity, just like the **Inca Trail** climbs to Machu Picchu."

A new path

This vision became reality when Inon met David Landis, an experienced hiker from Pennsylvania and the author and photographer of the comprehensive **Hiking the Jesus Trail** guidebook. In 2007, Landis scouted out the best hiking route from Nazareth to Capernaum, looking to include as many different communities as possible to create a shared interest in its upkeep.

The trail was approved by Israel's **Society for Protection of Nature** and blazed in the run-up to now-retired Pope Benedict XVI's visit to the country in 2009. The Pope, then 82, did not hike the Jesus Trail but did perform a mass with thousands of congregants atop the nearby **Mount Precipice**. In 2011, former British Prime Minister Tony Blair **walked the first section** of the Jesus Trail with Maoz Inon, along with photographers and TV camera crews.

Nazareth is the natural starting point for the Jesus Trail. The phrase "Jesus of Nazareth" appears no less than 17 times in the New Testament and is widely considered to be Jesus' hometown. Today Nazareth is the largest Arab town in Israel, home to 80,000 people, of which 70% are Muslim and 30% are Christian. The town is so central to Christianity that the very words for Christian in Arabic *(Naṣārā)* and in Hebrew *(Notzrim)* derive from here.

The town's main attraction is the **Basilica of Annunciation**, a large church built on a site where the angel Gabriel is said to have appeared to Mary. It is also the official starting point for the Jesus Trail. The current church was built in 1969 over the ruins of an old Byzantine-era and then Crusader-era church that was destroyed in the 7th Century during the Muslim conquest of Palestine. Inside, the lower-level grotto was first consecrated as a holy shrine during the 4th-century reign of the Roman Emperor Constantine – who famously converted to Christianity and wanted to found churches to mark Jesus' life – around the same time as Bethlehem's **Church of the Nativity** and the **Church of the Holy Sepulchre** in Jerusalem.

Nearby in Nazareth's old market, the **Synagogue Church** is said to be the spot where Jesus started preaching at the relatively late age of 30. An ancient structure with an underground arch chapel, the church is almost certainly not the original, as all Jewish places of worship were destroyed by the Romans in the year 67.

From Nazareth, hikers follow the white-and-orange striped markers for 7.8km to the hilltop village of **Tzippori**. Although it has ruins dating from the 7th Century BC, most of the village was built in the Hellenistic period, around 300BC. The ruins of the old city are now part of the protected Tzippori National Park, famous for its Byzantine floor mosaics including the **Mona Lisa of the Galilee**. A place of commerce in Jesus' time, some historians believe his father Joseph may have found carpentry work here.

Miracles and mountains

The trail then heads east for 5.8km, passing through the Arab villages of Mashhad and Cana, which is disputably the site of Jesus' first miracle – turning water into wine. Each year thousands of travellers renew their wedding vows at Cana's **Franciscan Wedding Church**, where ancient stone jars, presumably like the ones Jesus used, are displayed. Not surprisingly, local **wine and souvenir shops** mark this alcoholic miracle with bottles of local merlot, while travellers can stay a night at the **Cana Wedding Guesthouse**, where accommodation ranges from dorms to large family bedrooms.

Day two of the trail heads 8km east from Cana through the forested Tur'an valley to the small Jewish village of Ilaniya, stopping for lunch at the **Yarok Az Goat Farm** where guests can learn about organic farming, cheese making and even stay the night in a dome-shaped eco-lodge. Otherwise, push on another 4km to end the day at **Kibbutz Lavi**, a rural cooperative village that was set up in 1949 by British Jewish immigrants. Aside from its 148-room hotel, the kibbutz makes synagogue furniture and has a Holocaust memorial dedicated to relatives of kibbutz members.

On the third day, hikers walk 5.3km north to the holiest site for the Druze – an Arab sect residing in Israel – called **Nebi Shu'eib**. Located at the base of the Horns of Hattin, a large hill where Saladin, the first Sultan of Egypt, defeated the Crusaders at the Battle of Hattin in 1187. The Druze believe this site is also the tomb of Jethro, Moses' father-in-law. The complex is a huge mosque-like structure; outside there is a large courtyard for gatherings while inside the tomb is marked by a green satin cloth. Visitors will need to cover their heads and take off their shoes to enter.

Afterwards, climb to the top of the hill for panoramic views of the whole trail, and hike 9km northwest to end the day with a delicious meal at the **Arbel Guesthouse**, where the chef's specialty is lamb casserole and homemade chocolate. Hikers are welcome to stay a night here or at the nearby luxurious cabins of **Arbel Holiday Homes**.

The final day begins with a 2km trek north from the village of Arbel to the summit of Mount Arbel, an imposing mountain overlooking Lake Galilee, then heads 5km down to the small closed-off ruins of Migdal (biblical *Magdala*), thought to be the home of Mary Magdalene. The tiny ruins of Migdal's old synagogue are not open to the public but visitors can take a 2km detour to the shore of Lake Galilee for a trip on the **Jesus Boat**, a 2,000-year-old vessel that was excavated and restored in 1986. From here, either enjoy a swim in Lake Galilee (from one of the many pebbled beaches or pay to use the facilities of **Kibbutz Ginosar**, 2km east around the lake). Or go straight to the **Mount of Beatitudes**, 2.5km to the northeast, to see its tranquil gardens and church, known for the Sermon on the Mount. This sermon, the longest piece of teaching from Jesus, was the "I Have a Dream" speech of its day and includes such famous quotes as "Blessed are the peacemakers".

The trail ends just 2km southeast of the Mount of Beatitudes in **Capernaum**, a large fishing village at the time of Jesus and said to be the home of Saint Peter. Travellers can explore the ruins of two ancient limestone synagogues, a modern Catholic church built over a 5th-century octagonal church known as St Peter's House and the spectacular pink-domed Orthodox Church of Capernaum.

In addition to following Jesus' footsteps, the Jesus Trail closely follows the principles of the **Leave No Trace** organisation: only walking along established footpaths, respecting wildlife and carrying trash bags to dispose of any waste. "There is no enforcement of garbage disposal fines in Arab towns," explained Inon. "But thanks to the Jesus Trail, the local communities are becoming more aware of their environment."

Indeed, the Jesus Trail aims to have a positive impact on the local environment. In 2012 they participated in **Clean-up the World Day** (an annual global conservation event to be held again on 20 to 22 September 2013) by leading hundreds of local school children in and around Nazareth, picking up garbage along the route.

"We also encourage hikers to sleep in the villages and not to camp, as it contributes to the local economy and reduces their impact on nature," Inon said. "One of the highlights is that one night you are staying with a Muslim family in **Cana** and the next night with Jewish families in **Kibbutz Lavi**. This is the core of the Jesus Trail."

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Cultural regeneration

The ancient seaside port of Jaffa is rapidly changing as neighbouring Tel Aviv spreads south. (Courtesy of GoIsrael.com)

Jaffa, an Israeli city in flux

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The 4,000-year old port is experiencing a cultural regeneration, but as the bohemians, boutiques and bistros move in, the secular city is striving to preserve its down-to-earth charm.

By Dan Savery Raz
17 June 2013

At sunrise in Jaffa, the familiar skyline dotted with mosques, churches and palm trees has a new background of towering cranes. As the Mediterranean metropolis of Tel Aviv spreads south, high-rise buildings are being built in Jaffa to cope with the overflow.

It was not always this way. Just more than a century ago, Tel Aviv was nothing but sand dunes, while Jaffa has been a major port city for around 4,000 years. Once considered a little "Jerusalem by the Sea", modern Jaffa is being transformed into a hip hive of art galleries, theatres and restaurants. But as the bohemians, boutiques and bistros move in, you can still find small hummus restaurants, fresh fish stalls, family-run bakeries and an old **flea market** selling inexpensive antiques, Persian rugs and shisha pipes. Like Jerusalem, Jaffa is a place where Arab, Jewish and Christian cultures genuinely intertwine, but here diversity unites rather than divides.

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Four thousand years earlier
Jaffa, called "Joppa" in the Bible, is said to be founded by Japheth, the son of Noah, and came to prominence during the reign of the Israelite King Solomon around 950BC. An attractive port for trade, Jaffa was conquered many times, including by the Assyrians (701BC), the Persians (586BC), the Hellenistic Empire (382BC) and the Romans (around 30BC), who eventually destroyed most of the city. Much of what remains today dates from the later Byzantine, Arab and Crusader eras, though the underground **Old Jaffa Visitors' Centre** displays some excavated remains from Hellenistic and Roman times.

An important site for early Christianity, the rooftop of the **House of Simon the Tanner** (currently closed for renovations is said to be where St Peter had his dream to convert gentiles to the new faith. Old Jaffa's most prominent building, **St Peter's Monastery**, is a stunning Baroque Franciscan church built in the 1890s on the ruins of the Crusader citadel.

The city was part of the Ottoman Empire for more than 400 years, briefly interrupted in 1799 by Napoleon. In 1820 a Jewish khan (guesthouse) was established by an Istanbul rabbi and Jaffa became a gateway for boatloads of Jewish immigrants. The port became famous for its warehouses of Jaffa oranges, grown in what was then Palestine and exported all over the world.

The Arab-Israeli conflict in spring 1948 forced the majority of Jaffa's Arab residents to flee, and during the 1950s Old Jaffa became a retrogressive crime area nicknamed "The Wasteland". Most of the remaining Arabs moved to **Ajami**, a neighbourhood that was also the setting for the eponymously named 2009 Oscar-nominated film.

"Jaffa was a typical Arab city of 70,000 people with dancing halls, radio stations and theatres until 1948," said Igal Ezraty, co-founder of **the Arab-Hebrew Theatre of Jaffa**. "Afterwards only 5,000 people were left and it took 50 years to recover from this trauma. For 50 years there was no theatre or culture in Jaffa."

Cultural revival

Today Jaffa has a population of 46,000, of which 16,000 are Arab. “It really is a mixed city," Ezraty said. Producing plays in both Hebrew and Arabic, the theatre also hosts evenings of Palestinian music and poetry as well as an annual **Women's Festival** and a **Children’s Festival**, where children of all faiths perform together.

"Someone once called [this theatre] ‘an island of sanity’ because it is a democratic secular place, where Jews and Arabs work together,” Ezraty said. “It is really a model for Jaffa and all of Israel.”

The unique theatre was tested during the Second Intifada (Palestinian Uprising in 2000s), when tensions between the two communities rose. "There were many demonstrations in Jaffa and Israelis would not come to eat hummus here because the Arabs were throwing stones," Ezraty explained. "So we put a big sign in Jaffa calling for public talks. One evening everybody came and shared their views, and since then we have hosted an open mic night every Friday."

But much has changed in the last decade. "Ten years ago in the Second Intifada, Jaffa was not a comfortable destination for many people," said Inbal Baum, founder of the **Delicious Israel** culinary walking tours. "But as the security situation improved and with the excessive Tel Aviv real estate prices, many people returned to Jaffa."

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The gentrification trend looks set to continue with a number of boutique hotels scheduled to open over the next few years, including one by architect **Ramy Gill** in the renovated **Old French Hospital**. For those needing a room right now, the **Old Jaffa Hostel**, set in an old Turkish home and decorated with historic Arabic furniture, is an excellent choice.

Diverse dining

Despite the developments (some of the older merchants are leaving because they cannot afford the rising cost of rent), travellers can still find affordable eats in Jaffa. One such place is **Ali Caravan**, otherwise known as Abu Hassan, a kind of mecca that is considered to serve the best hummus in Israel. **Said Abu Elafia and Sons**, Jaffa's first bakery established in 1880, sells *sambusas* (filled pastries) and *bourekas* (stuffed breads with sheep's cheese).

Being an ancient fishing port, it is no surprise that there are a variety of seafood restaurants to choose from, with **The Old Man and the Sea** being the godfather of them all offering only the finest fresh fish. . Overlooking the seafront, the menu includes a range of fish, calamari and shrimp dishes, plus dozens of small complimentary salads.

"One of my favourites is **Kalamata** in Kedumim Square, a romantic Mediterranean restaurant with views on one side to the sea and on the other to the centre of Old Jaffa," Baum said. "But today, in Jaffa we can find the best of everything including delicious bakeries, ice cream parlours, fresh juice stands and fine dining restaurants."

One top-end option is **Cordelia**, a critically acclaimed French restaurant by renowned Israeli chef Nir Zook. Located on a flea market side street is the cheaper but just as atmospheric **Puaa** – part retro-style cafe and part antique gallery. Aside from the delicious soups, salads and chicken dishes, the furniture, paintings and crockery are all up for sale.

In the last few years, Jaffa's Old Port has seen a remarkable makeover. The seafront has a new 7km cycle path connecting it to Tel Aviv, and the area has become a popular nightspot. "The warehouses that used to house Jaffa oranges have been converted into galleries and hip restaurants," Baum said. "Many political artistic statements can be seen on the outer walls, particularly between Hangars 2 and 3". The **Jaffa Salon** gallery exhibits more than 200 works of Palestinian art and **St-Art** supports young Israeli artists.

A popular hangout, **The Container** is a hybrid art space, fish restaurant and bar set in a renovated shipping hangar that opened in 2008. It houses a different art exhibition every three weeks and hosts local DJs and live bands. "When we came here there was nothing at the port except for the old fishermen restaurants," said Noa Oron, the venue's events manager. " [Now] we have a diverse range of artists from blues to Turkish arabesque, gypsy to classical cello, with an electronic twist."

Indeed, other hangars in the area are being used in creative ways. None more so than the **Nalaga'at Centre**; home to the world's first deaf-blind theatre ensemble. Nalaga'at, which means "do touch", is a non-profit organisation comprising the onsite theatre, **Café Kapish**, which employs deaf waiters, and **BlackOut**, a pitch-black restaurant with a staff of blind waiters. Hangar 2 is the home of the **Israeli Choreographers Association**, a new dance venue for workshops and recitals.

All over Jaffa, it seems changes are taking place, but some people hope these changes do not happen too quickly.

"We don't want to be like Tel Aviv's port," said Oron, referring to the city's northern, harbour that has become a busy shopping mall. "I hope that Jaffa will remain a place for the fishermen. This is the beauty of Jaffa, to see the fishermen catching their fish, the mixture of Israelis and Arabs, it is something different. There are small theatres and art galleries but it's still Jaffa. It is bohemian but it is down to earth."

A wild mountain goat

(Dan Savery Raz)

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Israel's mysterious 'Grand Canyon'

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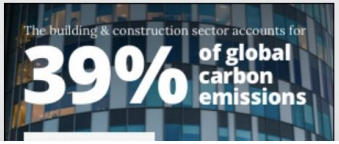

Uncover Maktesh Ramon, a vast lunar landscape hidden in the heart of the Negev desert.

By Dan Savery Raz
12 July 2013

Roughly the size of New Jersey and well known for being home to the Dead Sea, Jerusalem and Lake Galilee, tiny Israel has a gigantic secret that many travellers have never heard of. But word is slowly spreading about **Maktesh Ramon**, a vast lunar landscape hidden in the heart of the Negev desert.

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Described by Lonely Planet as "Israel's Grand Canyon", the *maktesh* is not a canyon, but a unique geological phenomenon. There are only seven makteshim in the world – five in Israel and two in Egypt's Sinai desert – and Maktesh Ramon is by far the biggest.

"The word comes from the Hebrew for 'crater', but a maktesh is not created by a meteorite that crashed into our atmosphere," said Itay Naveh, manager of the **Mitzpe Ramon Visitors Centre**. "Maktesh Ramon was created by the erosion of a mountain that rose above sea level. Millions of years ago, the limestone top of the mountain broke and the inside of it was drained out by the river. So, it's more like a giant funnel, not really a canyon."

Indeed, a more accurate definition of a maktesh is an "erosion cirque", providing a peek into the earth's crust and detailing millions of years of evolution. The ancient rivers of Ramon and Ardon that once ran through it have long since dried up, leaving a giant bowl that is 300m deep, 8km wide and 40km long, featuring multi-coloured sandstone, volcanic rock and fossils.

Life on Mars

Unbelievably remote, the town of Mitzpe Ramon has grown on the edge of the crater. Founded as a workers camp in 1951, Mitzpe (Hebrew for watchtower), was an isolated community of mostly Romanian and North African Jewish immigrants who came to build roads. But in recent years it has become a hub for urbanites from Tel Aviv and desert travellers who prefer to take the scenic route south to the Red Sea and the resort town of Eilat.

With tourism being a key part of the town's economic future, the **Mitzpe Ramon Visitors Centre** reopened in February 2013 after more than two years of renovations. There are detailed maps of area hiking trails and a museum with a 3D model of the maktesh, plus exhibitions and films on the local geology.

The centre also has a new section dedicated to the life of **Ilan Ramon**, the first Israeli astronaut, who tragically died in a fatal NASA mission in 2003. Born Ilan Wolferman, he changed his surname to Ramon as he loved the Maktesh Ramon region. This area of the desert, part of the Negev Highlands, is also pitch black at night, making for a wonderful place to observe the stars and a fitting memorial site for an astronaut.

Living on the edge

In recent years, the Ramon region, resembling the fictional Star Wars planet of Tatooine, has become an adventure tourism hotspot. Local companies such as **Guide Horizon** run Jeep and desert buggy tours circling the rim of the crater, complete with meals and lodge-style accommodation. Those that prefer two wheels can travel with **iBike**, which offers equipment hire and cycling tours for all levels. Bike around the edge or cycle into the crater on Route 40, passing the Carpentry, a unique rock formation that resembles wood.

Sporty travellers can also head to the **Silent Arrow desert camp**, 2.5km west of town, for a game of **Desert Archery**. It is similar to golf but instead of a club you have a bow and arrow and instead of a hole you have to hit balloons dotted around the rocks.

However, for most travellers, the most immersive way to explore the crater is by hiking one of its many trails. One popular trek is the **Ein Saharonim Trail**, which starts in the middle of the crater, a 20-minute drive south of Mitzpe Ramon at the **Be'erot Camp Ground**. Run by a local Bedouin tribe, the camp offers large dorm tents as well as fresh mint tea and black coffee for a handful of shekels. The 5km circular trail leads to the 2,000-year-old ruins of the Saharonim Stronghold, an ancient station on the Nabataean Spice Route. The Nabataeans were ancient Arabs who spoke Aramaic, lived in caves and built cities such as Petra in Jordan. At one point, the Spice Route stretched from India to Rome, passing through Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Ethiopia and what was then Judea. Not much remains of the old stronghold, which was an inn for traders, but the views from this elevated position in the middle of the crater are spectacular.

Other maktesh hikes maktesh include a mostly flat 2.5km trek down Nahal Ardon (a desert valley), which also ends with fantastic views, or the more challenging 9km trek to Mount Ramon on the crater's southern edge, passing the seven volcanic rock hills called the Ramon Horns.

Due to the intense desert sun, it is advisable to start early, take plenty of water and wear a hat. However, the town of Mitzpe Ramon, situated 900m above sea level, is actually one of the coldest places in Israel, especially at night. The best times of year to visit are March to June or September to November, when temperatures hover at a pleasant 20 to 30C.

Practicalities

There is no shortage of accommodation options in Mitzpe Ramon. In the past decade, many of the once-abandoned hangars in the town's old industrial zone have been turned into alternative art galleries, shops and studios. **Adama**, a large warehouse that is now a dance and meditation centre, offers tepee-like stays.

Just around the corner you can try some good home cooking at Hakatzeh (2 Har Adon St). This cosy family-run restaurant serves dishes such as meatballs with aubergine and couscous, beef goulash and some of the best *labneh* (white cheese made from yoghurt) in Israel, pared with pita bread and olives.

On the same street is **Chez Eugene**, an upmarket gastro-chef restaurant and small boutique hotel. Inspired by French-Belgian cuisine, Eugene offers succulent steaks, salmon and goose breast, plus each room is designed with funky furniture and contemporary art.

The most prominent hotel is undoubtedly **Beresheet**, an ultra-luxurious 111-room resort at the town's eastern entrance that opened in 2011. Unlike anything else in town, Beresheet (which means Genesis in Hebrew) has an infinity pool overlooking the crater, several private pools and a gourmet restaurant with jaw-dropping views. Guests are transported around the resort on golf carts while soft jazz is pumped from speakers.

At the other end of the town, the **Green Backpackers** also opened in 2011 in a quiet cul-de-sac off Nahal Zia Street. This cute budget hostel has soft carpets, laundry service, second-hand books, free wi-fi, a DVD library, a travellers' message-board and shared recipes in the communal kitchen.

The most remote place to stay in Mitzpe Ramon is **Silent Arrow**, situated 700m west of town down a bumpy dirt track. Here, travellers can sleep in a communal Bedouin tent or in private dome tents, where the only sound you will hear is that of your own snoring.

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A Druze woman cooking

(Credit: Itamar Grinberg/GoIsrael.com)

Israel's forgotten tribe

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High in the country's northern hills you will find the Druze, a friendly people often overlooked in the politics of the Holy Land.

By Dan Savery Raz
21 August 2013

Contrary to popular belief, the Holy Land is not just home to two peoples – Israelis and Palestinians – but a diverse mix of cultures. Minority groups in Israel include the A-B-C-D-E of Arabs, Bedouins, Copts, Druze and Ethiopians. Although most visitors may know something of Bedouins, the delights of the Druze tribe are a well-kept secret.

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Located in the northern Carmel, Galilee and Golan Heights regions, Druze villages, such as **Daliyat al-Karmel**, Isfiya and Majdal Shams, are usually set high on a hillside with outstanding views of the valleys below. All over these areas, Druze women can be found by the roadside selling freshly baked pita breads, olives and *labaneh*, a smooth yoghurt-type cheese, to passersby. But who are the Druze?

A peaceful people

Widely regarded as a friendly community that lives in peace with Israel and its neighbours, the **Druze people** are an often-overlooked religious Arab minority (82.6% of Arabs in Israel are Sunni Muslim, 9% are Druze and 9% are Christian Arabs). Worldwide, there are around one million Druze living mainly in Syria and Lebanon, with 104,000 in Israel. Although they speak Arabic, the Druze are not Muslim, but call themselves *muwahhidun* (monotheists).

The Druze religion was born in the 10th Century in Egypt, during the reign of al-Hakim, leader of the Fatimid Caliphate dynasty, who believed he was the earthly incarnation of God. The Druze sect became his followers, splitting from the Shi'ites, and fled to remote mountainous areas of Lebanon, Syria and what is now Israel to escape persecution.

Blending Islamic, Hindu and Greek philosophy, the Druze believe in reincarnation and share prophets with Judaism, Christianity and Islam, including Moses, Jesus and Mohammed. They have their own flag, the Druze Star, with each of the five colours representing a prophet.

There are a number of Druze holy sites in Israel that are open to visitors. The most important is **Nebi Shu'eib**, the grave of Jethro, said to be the father-in-law of Moses and who the Druze believe to be the founder of monotheism. This large mosque-like dome and courtyard was built on a site known as the "Horns of Hittin" overlooking Lake Galilee, where in 1187 Saladin, the first Sultan of Egypt and Syria, defeated the Crusaders.

The second-most important Druze site is **Sabalan's Tomb**, located above the village of **Hurfeish**, inland from the coastal town of Nahariya. The mausoleum, with its mountain views, marks the burial place of the Druze prophet Zebulum, who preached the religion in the 11th Century.

About 20km further south in the Arab village of Kfar Yasif is **Nabi al-Khadr**, meaning both Elijah's Tomb and "green" in Arabic, which has a pleasant picnic area surrounded by weeping fig trees. As in Judaism, Elijah is one of the major Druze prophets and his tomb is housed in a small building with an arched chamber, where the walls are adorned with pictures of Kings David and Solomon.

Central Carmel

But the centre of the Druze universe is Daliyat al-Karmel, Israel's largest and most southern Druze town, founded some 400 years ago. Set on Mount Carmel, southeast of Haifa, Daliyat is today a sprawling all-day market with its main street lined with shops selling *darbuka* drums, sheesha pipes, pottery, jewellery, artwork and its fair share of psychedelic clothes.

On the north side of the main street is the **Druze Heritage Centre**, a small and free museum that exhibits traditional Druze artefacts, weapons and lots of photos of men with moustaches.

Further down the street is **Beit Oliphant** (also called Beit Druze), the former house of Sir Lawrence Oliphant, a British Christian author who made friends with the Druze and moved here in 1882. Today his house is used as a military memorial dedicated to Druze residents who served in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF).

Traditionally, Druze men are proud of their military service, but there are signs that this attitude is changing.

"I served in the IDF," said Aehab Asad, 33, a local Druze from Daliyat. "In my opinion, although Israel is a good place for us, I don't think Druzim get enough respect or benefit from going to the army." He added that many of his Druze friends are low-paid landscaping or construction workers and find it hard to progress in Israeli society.

One notable exception, though, is Naim Araidi, a Druze professor who was appointed Israel's ambassador to Norway last year. "The Druze community is a great community," said Araidi upon his appointment. "I have not seen another sector, including some Jewish citizens of Israel, whose loyalty is so strong."

Indeed, history has shown that the Druze are a faithful and welcoming people. "I'm biased because I'm Druze," said Asad. "But I think that no-one else offers hospitality and respect to guests like the *Druzim*. We just love people."

For a taste of this famed hospitality, travellers should head to Isfiya, Daliyat's neighbouring village, where the **Nations & Flavours** group can arrange for you to join a traditional Druze family meal. Much of Druze food comes from locally-grown herbs and plants; specialties include vine leafs stuffed with rice, pita breads cooked in a *taboon* oven sprinkled with *zaatar* (made from hyssop herb), *mansala* (cooked eggplant with chickpeas and tomato sauce) and *kababi* (kebabs served with tahini and salad). The Druze are also known for their distinctively large-but-flat pita breads.

Stay at the **El-Manzul Druze Lodging** in Isfiya, a huge house where guests can enjoy a Jacuzzi, massages and a traditional Druze breakfast of *labneh*, pita bread, olives and a variety of small salads. Just out of town is the **Muhraka Monastery** – a stunning Catholic church built on the highest peak of Mount Carmel, and an excellent vantage point over the Mediterranean coast to the west and the sweeping grassy plains of the Jezreel valley to the east.

From a great height

Further north in the Upper Galilee region, Druze villages can be found scattered on hilltops spreading all the way up to the Syrian border. One of the biggest is **Beit Jann**, on the peak of Mount Meron. Here, from the highest point in Israel (940m above sea level), it is possible to see the whole of the Galilee, Lebanon and Syria. The aptly-named **Touch the Sky** is a deluxe Druze hotel and restaurant pitched on the mountainside, run by the Abu Haya family, that offers guided tours of the Druze holy sites

About 12km west is the tiny Druze village of Yanuah, where the **Sa'ad Family** has been running their Druze-style guest house for nearly 50 years. Yanuah, mentioned in the Bible as Janoah, has been inhabited since the Bronze Age and the town is built on the remains of Byzantine and Crusader settlements. Travellers to the village can visit an old olive press, sample the local bakeries and explore some ancient biblical-era caves.

At the northern tip of Israel, not far from the troubled Syrian border, is the village of Majdal Shams. Despite the current turmoil in Syria, nearly 9,000 Druze people live in this peaceful retreat set among apple and cherry orchards. It is also a stone's throw away from Mount Hermon, which due to its altitude turns into a surreal Middle Eastern snow-covered ski resort in winter.

Nearby, **Nimrod's Fortress**, an old Arab castle dating from 1229, has an end-of-the-world feel. Although it was not built by the Druze, shepherds from the tribe were the keepers of the fortress and the first to call it *Qal'at Namrud*, after the Biblical hunter Nimrod. Dubbed "the most exquisite ruins in the world" by Mark Twain, the fortress looks out across the Northern Golan Heights towards the road to Damascus. Over there, the Druze in Syria face an altogether more dangerous reality.

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Top 15 free things to do in Tel Aviv

DAN SAVERY RAZ *Lonely Planet Writer* 20 MAY 2019

With its skyscrapers and cosmopolitan lifestyle, Tel Aviv has been dubbed the 'Manhattan of the Mediterranean', and like New York, costs can be high. But contrary to its chic image, there's actually quite a lot you can see and do in TLV that is *chof-shee* ('free' in Hebrew). Spend your days relaxing on beaches, exploring Bauhaus boulevards or checking out some underground street art. Sooner or later, you'll stumble upon a free gallery, performance or party.

1. Hilton Beach

Go for an early-morning swim in the Mediterranean Sea. Anywhere along the city's 15km-long stretch of coast will do the trick, but one of the best spots to swim is the northern section of Hilton Beach. Here, the occasional rough waves are broken by a rocky bay, and swimmers can wade out far into the sea, away from the noise of the city waking up. From April to October, the sea temperature is pleasant and warm. In winter months, the southern stretch of Hilton Beach is great for surfers, and the bay is even floodlit at night.

2. Ben-Gurion House

Built in the early 1930s, Ben-Gurion House was the Tel Aviv home of Israel's first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, until his death in 1973. This modest house gives visitors an insight into the mind of one of the founding fathers of modern Israel. Located near the beach, it's open until the early afternoon and entrance is free. The structure is maintained as it was after his death, and downstairs, visitors can view photographs of the late PM meeting 20th-century icons such as US president John F Kennedy and Albert Einstein, while upstairs is home to an extensive library of books in different languages.

Seek a peaceful space in Park HaYarkon, Tel Aviv's green heart © Ilan Shacham / Getty Images

3. Park HaYarkon

You don't need a single shekel to enjoy the city's largest expanse of green space, Park HaYarkon. Here, on any given day, you'll find local Tel Avivians taking their dogs for a walk and playing sport along the banks of the Yarkon River. There's also a peaceful side: as you go further east, it becomes less like a patch of green in the city and more like a national park, rich with eucalyptus, willow and palm trees. Some use this area to practice tai chi, yoga or simply meditate.

4. Carmel Market

Undoubtedly the pulsating heartbeat of TLV, Carmel Market (*Shuk HaCarmel*) is about more than just food. It's an old-world trade centre, where sellers sing, dance and shout to beckon you over to their stalls. Often thronging with people purchasing groceries, the market is also a great place to snap some photos of the city in full swing. Stretching from Allenby St down towards the seafront, many stalls will let you try nuts, fruit, olives, cheese, cake and even taste some beer for free. By the time you reach the end of the *shuk*, you'll feel like you just had a meal! Running parallel to the Carmel Market is the quieter Nahalat Binyamin Crafts Market, open on Tuesdays and Fridays. Here, you can look at handmade ornaments, Judaica (items pertaining to Jewish life and customs) and paintings, as well as catch a few impromptu street performers.

5. Tel Aviv's promenade

Tel Aviv's main promenade (*Tayelet* in Hebrew) is a long stretch of boardwalks that runs from the city of Bat Yam in the south to Tel Aviv's Old Port in the north. Not surprisingly, this uninterrupted pavement, coupled with a coastal cycling path, is like a giant outdoor gymnasium. Tel Avivians love nothing more (except drinking coffee) than showing off their bodies and sporting prowess. If you're feeling active, plug in some earphones, pump up the volume and join the joggers on the seafront for a power run. If that sounds like too much, then you can happily just take a casual stroll all the way down to Jaffa.

Get lost in old Jaffa's meandering alleyways © Oleksii Gotovyi / Getty Images

6. Artist alleyways of Old Jaffa

Trickling off Old Jaffa's Kedumin Sq, the artists' quarter is a quaint mess of narrow, cobbled alleyways. Lined with old Ottoman-era stone houses, these alleyways date back to a medieval Crusader fort, and each one is named after a different sign of the zodiac. Today these houses are home to local artists, many of whom have opened galleries and shops. Nearby, you can explore St Peter's Monastery, a cream-coloured Franciscan church built in the 1890s, and the HaPisgah Gardens, a grassy knoll with a small amphitheatre that holds free concerts every Saturday night in July and August.

7. Graffiti in Florentin

Head to the hip neighbourhood of Florentin, in the south of the city, on the hunt for some street art. Artists such as Klone and Know Hope (Israeli versions of Banksy) challenge and inspire with their artwork, often found on derelict buildings. There are a few paid tours, but it's also easy enough to find some street art gems by yourself. Start in the centre of Florentin on Vital St and walk down to Arbarbanel St, where the old carpenter warehouses and garages have been spray painted with psychedelic murals. Other hubs include industrial areas such as Elifelet St and the Kiryat Hamelacha neighbourhood, home to Artspace, a nonprofit organisation supporting local artists.

Tel Aviv is called the 'White City' because of its abundance of Bauhaus buildings © ColorMaker / Shutterstock

8. Bauhaus walking tour

Meeting every Saturday at 11am outside 46 Rothschild Boulevard, Tel Aviv's official tourism office runs a free guided walking tour concentrating on the city's Bauhaus heritage. Dubbed the 'White City', the thousands of 1930s Bauhaus-style buildings were declared a Unesco World Heritage site in 2003. Bauhaus, an enormously influential design school, characterised by horizontal lines and minimalist decor, was brought to British-Mandate Palestine by German-Jewish architects fleeing Nazi persecution. Superb examples of Bauhaus architecture can be found on Bialik St, including Bialik Museum and Beit Ha'ir (the old city hall), which cost to enter but can be admired from outside. Another free walking tour focuses on the Sarona Colony (the old German Templar neighbourhood) and starts at 11am every Friday from 11 Alluf Mandler St.

Watch the sun slip below the Mediterranean from a perch in Jaffa © lucky-photographer / Getty Images

9. Sunset at Jaffa Port

Lying between the Arab neighbourhood of Ajami and the sea, Midron Yaffo Park is a welcome patch of green hillside just south of Jaffa Port. Once a rubbish dump, it was transformed into a park by the municipality in 2010. Because of its elevation, it makes a great spot to sip a cold beer while the sun descends below the horizon, often creating purples and pinks as it disappears. At any time of the day or night, you're likely to find local fishers trying their luck with the Mediterranean, just as in ancient times. It's worth noting that Jaffa Port is also home to one of the city's largest free car parks.

10. Comedy and open-mic nights

With a large native English-speaking community in town, Tel Aviv is home to a plethora of free open-mic nights where budding stand-up comedians try out their material. Popular venues for open-mics include the Mike's Place on Monday nights, Malan 18 on Tuesday nights and Dancing Camel Brewery (varies). For something a little more serious, theatre group the Stage runs occasional free poetry and story slams at various venues around the city.

11. Matkot on the beach

The iconic game of *matkot* – a simple paddle ball game of beach tennis – has become synonymous with Tel Aviv. On any given day, even in winter, you'll find locals on the sand belting a tiny plastic ball with their wooden rackets. But really *matkot* is just another way for Tel Aviv's beautiful boys and girls to bronze their bodies and play sport at the same time. Simply head to the beach and join a game. There appear to be no rules, except hitting the ball as hard as you can. On Gordon Beach, there's also a free outdoor gym, beach volleyball courts and folk dancing on Saturday morning. All along the beach, Tel Aviv offers free wi-fi for those who prefer to surf online.

12. Free gigs in Jaffa's Flea Market

Aside from being the centre for antique shops and stalls, Jaffa's Flea Market (*Shuk HaPishpashim*) is also home to a lively nightlife scene. Bars like Shaffa set tables and chairs on the paved street as live bands play. On Tuesday nights and weekends, the market becomes an impromptu stage for an eclectic range of live bands. Expect anything from Arabesque and klezmer (music of the Ashkenazi Jews) to alternative rock music played by talented local musicians. Afterwards, grab a tasty *boureka* (stuffed bread with sheep's cheese) on Yefet St from Abu Lafia & Sons bakery (not free, but pretty cheap!)

Show your true colours at the Jewish festival of Purim © Lerner Vadim / Shutterstock

13. A Purim street party

Each year Tel Avivians dress up in the most outlandish outfits they can get their hands on for the festival of Purim, usually held in late February or March. This somewhat minor Jewish festival commemorates the biblical story of Esther set in ancient Persia, but in modern-day Tel Aviv, it's been transformed into a huge week-long fancy dress party – the city's answer to the Rio Carnival – where people dress up as anything from superheroes to fish, cowboys to nuns. Purim culminates in a free street party, in recent years held at Kikar HaMedina, where DJs blast tunes until sundown on a Friday evening. Also popular with families, there are Purim parades for children, with the biggest held in the suburb town of Holon.

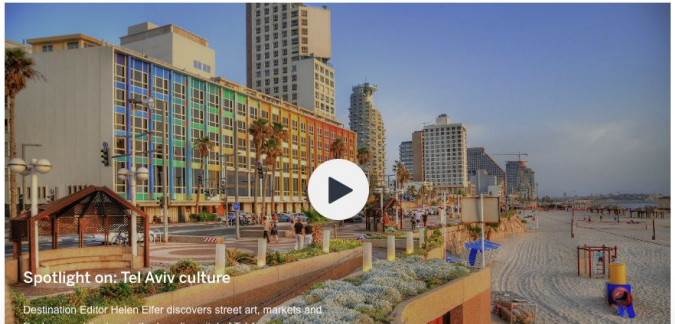
Tel Aviv's Pride parade is the biggest in the region and draws thousands of visitors © RnDmS / Getty Images

14. Tel Aviv Pride

Loud, proud and without a cloud in the sky, Tel Aviv Pride is the largest Pride festival in the region. Revellers come from all over the world to strut their stuff on the streets of Tel Aviv at this celebration of the LGBT+ community. Held in June each year, the heart of the festival is the street parade, which ends with a pulsating free beach party. But more than this, there are free events in the week leading up to the parade, including music nights in Jaffa and DJs on Hilton Beach, while everywhere in the city is decorated with rainbow flags.

15. Opera in the Park

Held on a warm summer evening every year, Opera in the Park is a gigantic free concert in Park HaYarkon. Something like an oversized picnic attended by nearly 100,000 people, residents gather on the hillside to enjoy some fine wine and food as the Israeli Opera gives a free performance of a classic opera. Even if opera's not your thing, this concert is one of the city's major annual events and a chance to experience Tel Aviv in a different, more laid-back mood.



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First published in October 2018, updated November 2019

SHARE THIS STORY:

Best things to do in Tel Aviv in winter

DAN SAVERY RAZ *Lonely Planet Writer* 3 DECEMBER 2018

Think of Tel Aviv and sandy beaches, bronze bodies and rooftop bars usually spring to mind, but a visit here in winter reveals a different side to the city. Though it has its fair share of winter sun, Tel Aviv's 'off-season' (roughly November to March) can be surprisingly chilly. But there's much to warm the cockles – from experiencing the festivals of Hanukkah and Christmas to escaping the cold in a just-opened museum – here are our top picks for the season.

Head to Jaffa to get in the Christmas spirit in Tel Aviv © sembler / Shutterstock

Check out a multicultural Christmas in Jaffa

There certainly won't be any snow or reindeer, but Christmas in Tel Aviv is a unique experience. Head to the ancient port of Jaffa to wander around the winding alleyways and a Crusader-era square decorated with twinkling Christmas lights. Home to Arabs and Jews, Jaffa is a real cultural mix, where the cathedral-esque St Peter's Monastery sits next to Ottoman-era mosques. Every year, Jaffa installs a huge Christmas tree outside the Clock Tower (from 17 December to early January) and hosts a parade with fireworks, usually on Christmas or Boxing Day.

Elsewhere in town, the Christmas spirit can be harder to find, but in recent years, local bars such as Kuli Alma and Spicehaus have held Christmas parties and serve warm sangria, much like mulled wine. If you're staying in town, Abraham Tours can arrange a visit to Bethlehem in the West Bank.

Indulge in the arrival of Hanukkah with a festive doughnut, made in bakeries all around Tel Aviv © Tali Budlender & Nick Logan / Getty Images

Delight in some delicious Hanukkah doughnuts

Hanukkah – the Jewish festival of light – is celebrated each year with eight days of candle-lighting ceremonies. But for most Tel Avivians, even those who aren't religious, this festival is about one thing only – doughnuts. Yes, Hanukkah doughnuts (*Sufganiyot* in Hebrew) are no ordinary treats. All over town, bakeries compete with each other for the most luxurious doughnuts, such as banana caramel, Belgian chocolate and creamy cronuts. The undisputed king of doughnuts is Roladin, a bakery with a number of branches over the city, followed by Shemo, a boutique patisserie. The Showroom Bakehouse, also specialises in American-style doughnuts, pretzels and cookies – it's located on Rabin Sq, where a giant *Hanukkiah* (candelabrum) is lit each night of the festival.

Geek out at an escape room

Take a break from the cold outside in one of Tel Aviv's dozens of escape rooms where you can embrace your inner geek and save the world. Totally trendy with young Tel Avivians, escape rooms have popped up all over the city in random office buildings and apartment blocks. Brainit – the leading escape room network in Israel – runs adventure games, where participants solve puzzles, uncover mysteries and use clues to escape from their trapped room. Themes range from horror, murder and a virtual-reality space station.

Visit the newly opened Natural History Museum

A great way to spend a few hours indoors, the Steinhardt Natural History Museum recently opened its doors to visitors. Set on the Tel Aviv University campus, this rather impressive five-storey museum houses interactive exhibitions spanning nature and biology. Highlights include displays on 'The Human Impact', which looks at the effect of pollution on marine life, and 'What Makes Us Human', uncovering the history of humans from ape to modern homo sapiens.

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SHARE THIS STORY:

Tel Aviv with kids: a beachside city for the whole family

DAN SAVERY RAZ *Lonely Planet Writer* 28 AUGUST 2018

While Tel Aviv at night is a partygoers' paradise, during the day, it's a magnet for families. Children are seen and welcomed everywhere – in cafes, markets, museums, beaches and parks – and the *mishpacha* (family) vibe is part of the city's fabric.

Yet 15 years ago, Tel Aviv was mostly home to retirees or students, so what changed? Thanks to big investment in renewing the city's green spaces, seafront, transport and buildings, families flocked back to the urban areas from the suburbs. Today, walk down any boulevard, and you'll find a mini-playground where kids can play safely while the parents enjoy a cappuccino in one of the world's hippest beach cities.

Because of its compact size, central Tel Aviv is easy to get around with kids. Here's our top picks in TLV that both big and little kids will love.

Best sights and activities for kids

Children of all ages will enjoy a visit to the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, the city's major museum complex. While older kids may appreciate the surreal modern art collection featuring the likes of Picasso and Monet, younger children will love the vast open spaces, colourful sculptures and special exhibitions and shows especially put on for little ones. Recently, the museum's theatre held productions of *Peter and the Wolf* and *Jack and the Beanstalk* with a live orchestra. The newly opened Steinhardt Natural History Museum has more than half a million items, enough to keep the most curious kids entertained. Set on the campus of Tel Aviv University, the museum is designed with kids in mind and tells the story of the natural world, including exhibits on dinosaurs, creepy-crawlies and migrating birds, plus an interactive exhibition on life in the dark.

Perhaps not an obvious choice for kids, the Heroes exhibition at Beit Hatfutsot – the Museum of the Jewish People – offers a fun way for children to learn about geniuses such as Einstein. It includes a sports section, where kids can take part in a virtual Olympic games, and an area where children can create 3D pictures. Old Jaffa's labyrinth of ancient alleyways and art galleries will inspire older children, though younger kids may find it less interesting. A surefire hit with all the family, Safari Ramat Gan will delight youngsters as you drive past rhinos, flamingos and zebras before entering the zoo.

Teenagers are likely to love Tel Aviv's Luna Park, a smallish theme park with its fair share of white knuckle rides. Just outside of town, its younger sibling Superland, in the southern suburb of Rishon LeZion, has more space and attractions including a pirate ship, a few rollercoasters and a river rapids ride. Holon, just a short taxi ride from Tel Aviv, is home to the Israel Children's Museum, an experimental museum with a mixed bag of random exhibitions ranging from aliens and magic forests to The Beatles and lifecycle of a butterfly. Nearby, Yamit 2000, Israel's biggest waterpark, boasts some 20 water slides, though it has sporadic opening hours outside of the summer months.

Best beaches for kids

All of the city's 14km stretch of fine, sandy beaches make for a fun outing. Here you can top up your tan while children happily collect seashells, build sandcastles and play in the Med. All of Tel Aviv's beaches have lifeguards, outdoor showers and the all-important ice cream shops. The current near the shoreline is generally mild, as waves are broken by a rocky bay, making it safe for all ages to swim, though there are occasional 'black flag' days, usually after a storm, when lifeguards forbid swimming.

Metzitzim Beach, at the northern end of the coast, is an enclosed bay with a small seafront playground and well-equipped beach bar. Hilton Beach offers kayak, stand up paddleboarding and other watersports for older kids, while Frishman Beach and Gordon Beach are at the heart of the action, with plenty of space to spread out. Gordon Beach is also home to Gordon Swimming Pool, on the waterfront overlooking the Tel Aviv Marina, which has outdoor children's and baby pools, as well as sun-loungers and a larger saltwater pool for adults. Alma Beach, in front of the hip Florentin neighbourhood in the south, has a laid-back vibe and is popular with families, as it's just a short walk from the ancient sights of Old Jaffa. The heat can be brutal in the summer months, so it's best to arrive early in the morning or late in the afternoon and, of course, young children should wear hats.

Peaceful parks and fountains to play in are scattered all across Tel Aviv © Suprun Vitaly / Shutterstock

Best parks for kids

Tel Aviv is a pretty green city and has an abundance of parks and playgrounds for children to let off some steam. The largest of all, Park HaYarkon is a lush expanse on the banks of the Yarkon River. Within the park, there are a number of attractions for kids, from a small farm with ibex and goats to pedal boats, a botanical garden, a bird park and even a hot air balloon. Independence Park has a large playground with swings, slides and climbing frames, and it's also a beautiful spot for a picnic overlooking the sea. Toddlers will love the Old Port with its wide wooden promenade featuring sand pits and water fountains, ideal for tiny scooters. Gan Meir Park and Sarona both have large outdoor playgrounds, plus cafes and shops for grown-ups. Even Tel Aviv's inner-city has peaceful places to play, including a park on Dubnov St (near Sarona) and another on Amsterdam St (behind Arlozorov St). If shopping with kids is on the agenda, then Gan Ha'ir and the Dizengoff Centre offer soft-play areas (*mischakiyot*) for babies and toddlers.

Most of Tel Aviv's restaurants have menus sure to please younger palates © Rawpixel.com / Shutterstock

Best places to eat with kids

Most cafes in Tel Aviv cater for families and have children's menus. The city has so many great restaurant or street food options that choosing where to eat is one of the highlights of a family trip. Easy options include Landwer Café, where waiters usually bring children crayons and puzzles with their pasta, pizza or schnitzel. Friendly Italian restaurant Allora has an excellent kid-friendly dishes and of course ice cream for dessert.

If ice cream is missing from the menu, head to Arte, a not-to-be-missed gelato with homemade tasty flavors such as cherry cake. Tamara is a frozen yogurt paradise, where kids can add sweets and chocolate sauce to their ice-cold creations. Families looking for fresh fish will not be disappointed; check out Goocha, a fashionable seafood restaurant in the north, or The Old Man & the Sea, an Arab institution offering the finest fish in Jaffa.

Pick up fresh fruit and vegetables and a few street snacks at Tel Aviv's Carmel Market © rasika108 / Shutterstock

If you're up for it, one of the tastiest street food experiences can be found at Carmel Market, a bustling, narrow stretch of stalls selling fresh fruit and vegetables, olives, herbs and spices, plus baked breads and sweets. The *shuk* (market) may be noisy, crowded and intense, but it's also a feast for the senses. Filled with exotic colours, smells and music, it's like taking children back to an age before lifeless supermarkets and shopping malls.

Tel Aviv is a great place to introduce kids to hummus and falafel. HaKosem is one of the top falafel joints in town, famous for its delicious green falafel balls (which get their colour from the coriander). It also serves a great shawarma (kebab meat, salad and tahini wrapped in a pita). For cheap eats on the go, head to Abu Lafia & Sons on Yefet St in Old Jaffa for tasty *bourekas* (stuffed breads with sheep's cheese) and Arab-style oven-baked pizzas.

When to go

Spring (late February to May) and autumn (late September to November) are the best times to visit Tel Aviv, when the temperature remains mild but not scorching. If visiting in July and August, expect extreme heat and humidity, plus sights filled with tour groups. Accommodation prices shoot up during Jewish festivals such as Pesach (around April) and Sukkot (a week in early October), though there are more shows and exhibitions for kids at these times.

How to get around

Tel Aviv is in the process of building a light rail system, due to open in 2021, though locals are sceptical they'll hit the deadline. Until then, the best way to get around is by foot or bicycle. Its wide boulevards (such as Ben Gurion, Rothschild or Nordau), parks and the main seafront promenade are great for children's pushchairs and have designated bicycle paths, plus most inner-city buses have areas for pushchairs. The city's notorious lack of parking makes driving a car in town a stressful option, but taxis cost around 30–50NIS for a short ride, a small price to pay for some air-conditioning and a calm, rested child.

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SHARE THIS STORY:

Tel A-vegan: where to find the best animal-free eats in Tel Aviv

DAN SAVERY RAZ *Lonely Planet Writer* 2 FEBRUARY 2018

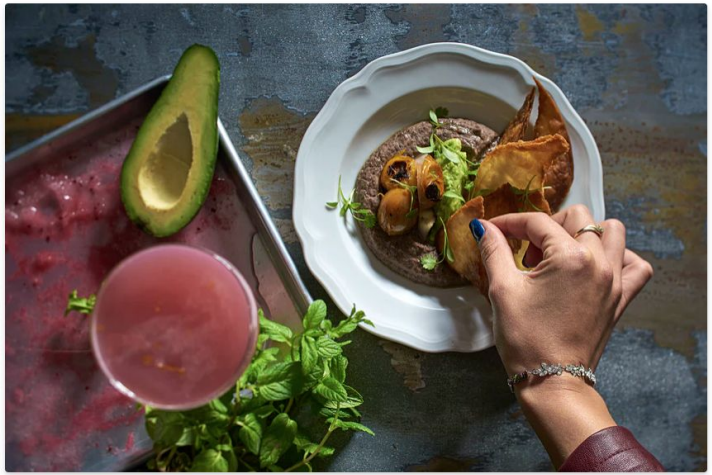
If Israel is the 'vegan nation', then Tel Aviv is its capital. Boasting hundreds of vegan restaurants, the city's animal-free food scene has blossomed, and it's consistently ranked as one of the most vegan-friendly cities in the world. Recent surveys have shown that nearly 15% of Israelis are vegetarian and more than 5% are vegan, making this place home to the most vegans in the world per capita.

Tel Aviv's abundance of food markets made veganism popular here before it was trendy worldwide © Fotokon / Shutterstock

Why has veganism sprouted here? Well, Tel Aviv had a head start. Though veganism is an international trend now, the city's love for its hummus joints, falafel stalls and the fresh, locally grown produce at Carmel Market has much deeper roots. Plus, veganism fits well with the kosher diet. All of this available organic fruit and veg mixed with some of the finest chefs in the Middle East has created one of the most innovative foodie scenes on earth.

Zakaim

Influenced by the Iranian food of his childhood, chef Harel Zakaim's passion for high-quality vegan cuisine led him to open Zakaim, in an alleyway off Allenby St. Zakaim changes the restaurant's 100% vegan menu to fit the season, and highlights include its Persian-style rice with crunchy potatoes on top, cauliflower gondi served on a chickpea waffle, chargrilled aubergine and vegan pizzas for kids. The hand-torn fries served in a brown paper bag with homemade vegan mayonnaise are a revelation for lovers of chips, plus there's Persian tea and non-dairy dark chocolate truffles for dessert.



Hip 416 serves up quintessential comfort foods that are fully vegan, including a pan of sizzling 'steak' © 416

416

416 is an ultra-cool New York-style diner with a vegan streak. The idea is to unashamedly serve up soul-food classics without harming animals, so diners can savour delicious dishes such as vegan shawarma served in Arabic pita bread and mushroom schnitzel sandwich with fries. But the signature dish is the shockingly meat-like seitan steak served in an iron pan with roast potatoes, fried onions and vegetables — it's so juicy that you'll need a steak knife!

Bana

Run by two chefs, Bana is a vegan restaurant that's difficult to pigeonhole. Set on Nahmani St, it's popular at lunchtimes with locals, thanks to its delicious vegan buffet and range of salads. The food here is experimental and unlike anything else in town: expect dishes such as purple sweet potato gnocchi with oyster mushrooms and the refreshing 'smoothie bowl' filled with kiwi fruit, different kinds of nuts and coconut tapioca.

Don't miss the veggie treats at Meshek Barzilay, especially its animal-free burgers and brunch © Meshek Barzilay

Meshek Barzilay

Located in the quiet Neve Tzedek quarter, Meshek Barzilay is a vegetarian restaurant that started out as an organic farm on the outskirts of Tel Aviv. When the restaurant opened in the city centre a few years ago, its founder, Merav Barzilay, fulfilled her lifelong dream of serving completely organic food. It's not hard to find a great veggie burger in Tel Aviv, but Meshek's mushroom, tofu and lentil burger in a steamed roll reigns supreme. Meshek Barzilay is also famed for its 'Royale' brunch, which has frittatas, tapas, bread baskets and cocktails on the menu.

Market TLV

Simple, affordable vegan food is what Market TLV is all about. Situated on Dizengoff St, one of the main shopping stretches in town, Market TLV could be mistaken for a soup kitchen. The menu is limited, but you'll be tempted by the three big pots sitting on the counter, filled with steaming hot Moroccan stew, Indian stew or Thai stew. Mexican black beans, homemade couscous and a less spicy Indian dish for children are also available. Market TLV has another branch on King George St that has a slightly different selection.

Go big with Dosa Bar's delicious platters of Indian pancakes and thalis © Dosa Bar

Dosa Bar

Offering authentic Indian food with an Israeli twist, the no-frills Dosa Bar is not only vegan friendly but it's also gluten free and kosher. The main dishes here are the dosa, an Indian pancake that comes in orange (potato masala), green (spinach) and purple (beetroot) varieties, and the thali, served with small portions of chutney, rice and salad. The house salad, which includes finely chopped celery and quinoa with some delicious Indian dressing, is also fab, plus you can wash it down with an imported Kingfisher beer.

Nanuchka, an authentic Georgian restaurant, was one of the first in Tel Aviv to go fully vegan, even with its traditional dishes © Nanuchka

Nanuchka

The story of Nanuchka is a unique one: formerly a Georgian restaurant that wouldn't have been out of place in Tbilisi, it was transformed into one of Tel Aviv's first vegan restaurants. Famous for its party atmosphere and live music at nights, Nanuchka also has an art gallery and patio garden. Classic Georgian dishes such as *khinkali* dumplings and baked *khachapuri* (cheese-filled bread) are prepared with vegetarian fillings such as spinach, tofu and spring onions. There's also an extensive alcohol menu if you want to continue the party into the early hours at the bar.

Anastasia

More than a cafe, Anastasia is also a well-stocked vegan shop selling a range of organic products. Its leafy patio is popular with a young crowd enjoying vegan breakfasts with options like corn omelettes with hummus, sumptuous salads and sandwiches, and a wide selection of desserts, cakes and coffees. Don't miss the hot almond milkshakes with cocoa and banana or the gluten-free tiramisu with coconut and chocolate mousse.

Take your pick of freshly made superfood juices at Jusa, perfect for a warm day in Tel Aviv © Jusa

Jusa

If you need a burst of energy, head to Jusa, which sells blends of freshly made fruit, nut and superfood juices in bottles. All the juices here are created using a hydraulic cold press to retain vitamins and nutrients. Flavours include nut milkshakes such as Nirvana (with cashew milk, dates, cinnamon, ginger and black pepper), as well as an array of green detox options and boosts such as aloe or turmeric. Not just for those on a diet, Jusa makes for a refreshing break for those sweltering hot days in Tel Aviv.

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SHARE THIS STORY:

How to live like a Local in Tel Aviv

DAN SAVERY RAZ *Lonely Planet Writer* 3 JANUARY 2018

Lonely Planet Local Dan Savery Raz has been living in Tel Aviv for almost 10 years. Initially attracted by the beaches, bars and general bustle of Tel Aviv, he stayed for the freewheeling, spontaneous lifestyle and family-friendly atmosphere. Oh, and the Middle East's most diverse culinary scene might have also had something to do with it...

Saturdays are for sunbathing at Hilton Beach © Fotokon / Shutterstock

On Saturdays, I... head to the beach like the rest of Tel Aviv. My favourite is Hilton Beach, on the city's northern coast, which includes TLV's unofficial gay beach and a dog-walkers' beach. Off-season it's a tranquil stretch of sand to walk my dog, Boots, and on-season, it's party central, filled with tanned sun-worshippers and locals throwing frisbees. Right behind this beach is Independence Park, an often overlooked green space that offers spectacular vistas of the Mediterranean and even Old Jaffa to the south.

My children love going to... Park HaYarkon, where they can run around grassy parkland and play to their heart's content at one of the many playgrounds with slides, wooden climbing frames and swings. For a grand day out with the little ones, we head out of town to Safari Ramat Gan, famous for its drive-through area and zoo.

Dan's top tip: don't leave Tel Aviv without trying the falafel © Dan Savery Raz / Lonely Planet

No trip to Tel Aviv would be complete without... tucking into a messy falafel. Although said to have originated from Egypt, this fried chickpea ball, usually served with salad in pita bread, has become synonymous with Tel Aviv. Falafel stalls can be found on almost every major street corner, and a *manna* ('portion') costs less than 20NIS. Other street food favourites include shawarma (kebab meat in a large wrap) and *sabich* (fried aubergine with egg) – all of these can be found at HaKosem.

The best way to cool down is... by sampling the world-class ice cream at Arte, which serves up bona fide Italian gelato, including a whole range of vegan varieties on Nahalat Binyamin St. The frozen yogurt at Tamara on Rothschild Blvd also offers healthier sweet options of tapioca or granola with fruit.

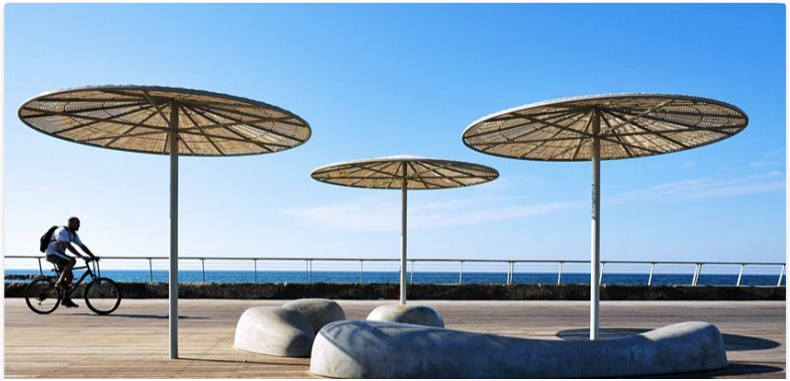
Shop in the heart of Tel Aviv at Carmel Market © Andrey Bayda / Shutterstock

When my parents are in town... we take a stroll around the city's markets, including the Jaffa Flea Market (home to antiques, jewellery and carpentry), Carmel Market (a loud food market that's the main artery of town) and Nahalat Binyamin Crafts Market (my mum's favourite place with its handmade artefacts and paintings). After some leg-tiring shopping, we'll have a rest in the quiet quarter of Neve Tzedek, the city's oldest neighbourhood with its choice of cafes and wine bars.

Breakfast means just one thing... Benedict. When friends or family visit, we have a tradition of taking them for a slap-up breakfast fit for a queen at this 24/7 breakfast cafe. Much more than bacon and eggs (though apparently they do offer fine 'un-kosher' pork), I normally splash out on the 'Royale' with poached eggs, salmon, salad, as-much-as-you-can-eat bread basket and a mimosa cocktail – now that's how to start a day in style.

One thing I love about Tel Aviv is... its air of freedom. Unlike its older sibling, Jerusalem, Tel Aviv is an open, cosmopolitan city. Each summer it plays host to the largest Gay Pride party in the Middle East. In the grungy neighbourhood of Florentin, you'll find inspiring graffiti and underground pubs playing Arabesque beats. Politicians and religious leaders are viewed with suspicion by locals, who prefer to put the world to rights over a cappuccino or beer.

One thing I hate about Tel Aviv is... the pollution caused by litter and excessive food packaging. The good news is Tel Aviv has a restaurant every five metres. The bad news is that this creates one hell of a mess. The city's beautiful beaches, peaceful parks and bustling street corners are often tarnished by overflowing dustbins and recycling is not always readily available. If in town, please respect the environment and take your rubbish with you if there's no dustbin nearby.



I know I'm a real Tel Avivian... because I reach a kind of otherworldly euphoria when I find a car parking space in town. Unfortunately, driving in Tel Aviv is pretty chaotic, and parking space is at a premium, so expect to hear more than a few drivers beeping their horns in frustration. In short, it's better to hire a bicycle and explore Tel Aviv on two wheels.

For a fun night out with friends... I'll hit a few bars in the centre of town, including Bicicletta, a buzzing patio garden bar; Port Sa'id, the heart of town for hipsters and Rothschild 12 – a live music venue that also has great breakfasts if it's getting near daybreak.

Lonely Planet's little black book of amazing destinations

LONELY PLANET *Lonely Planet Writer* 8 FEBRUARY 2018

A sublime sunset view, a wild off-road adventure: these are the moments that turn our escapes into love affairs for a new locale. And while there may be myriad cities on your bucket list befitting a fleeting holiday romance, what about the destinations we choose to make a long-term commitment to?

We often have a love-hate relationship with the cities we live in. They may infuriate us at times and have us dreaming of more exotic affairs, but through the make-ups and break-ups we still get butterflies when we think of home. In celebration of these special relationships, our Lonely Planet Locals get to the heart of why they love the cities they've decided to settle down with.

Tel Aviv is the life of the party © Maremagnum / Getty Images

Tel Aviv, Israel: my springtime soulmate

Those of close acquaintance know Tel Aviv by its pet name 'Hill of Spring', so it seemed apt that we should meet in April, just as the flowers were blooming and the locals were starting to dip their toes back into the balmy Mediterranean after the winter. Maybe it was the seasonal stirrings of romance in the air, but Tel Aviv felt like an old soulmate. As I delved deeper I discovered a spicy, artistic, musical soul. Like all long-term couples, we've had our ups and downs, war and peace – but it's safe to say things have never been boring.

The moment I fell: The sun was setting over the sea, turning the sky purple and pink as I walked along the seafront promenade. Struck by the energy of the locals jogging, cycling and playing basketball I had the urge to climb a tall eucalyptus tree. Sure, it wasn't the most sensible idea, but I know for certain that was the moment I fell (almost literally) for Tel Aviv.

Dan Savery Raz is a travel writer based in Tel Aviv. He loves writing poetry and fiction, as well as going on nature trails with his children. Follow his tweets @dansaveryraz.

The world is your office: remote working on a roll

DAN SAVERY RAZ *Lonely Planet Writer* 24 OCTOBER 2016

All work and no play? Not any more. Due to online freelancing, mobile tech and co-working spaces, more and more travellers are earning on the road. For these 'digital nomads', the world is a gig and anywhere is your office.

Few office views can compete with that of Hubud's workspace in Bali © Franz Navarette / Hubud Bali

Remote control

The concept of 'bleisure' (mixing business trips with pleasure) is as old as the hills, but the rise of the online 'collaborative economy' has opened up the world of working remotely to a new generation – and not just those flying business class.

Initially, these new kinds of workers, sometimes dubbed 'digital nomads', 'e-workers' or 'backhackers' (OK, we made the last one up), were mostly creative, academic or tech professionals. They were writers typing away on a beach in Thailand, graphic designers working on creative projects in an Amsterdam cafe or developers coding while, quite literally, on the fly. But more and more industries are catching on to the benefits of remote work.

Forbes says that 34% of the US workforce is now considered freelance, and this is set to rise to 40% by 2020. The economic crisis of 2008, mobile and cloud technology, and the influence of social networks like Facebook and LinkedIn have created a 'perfect storm' for the freelance age.

Working remotely is no longer the remit of tech-savvy millennials © SamuelBrownNG / Getty Images

Great gig in the sky

Just 10 years ago, if someone wanted to be a freelancer they needed contacts – lots of them. Today, they just join peer-to-peer sites like Upwork, Fiverr or any other marketplace where sellers can connect directly with buyers all over the world.

Initially popular with millennials and twenty-somethings who realised they could 'gig their way around the globe', remote work is now the choice of people of all ages. Semi-retirees building second careers while overseas, gap-year students earning as they go, young families on short-term relocations – the line between work and wanderlust is blurring.

While the upsides are clear – you get to see the world without going bankrupt – there are some potential downsides: instability, cash-flow problems and 'zero-hours' contracts, to name but a few. An often-overlooked aspect is not being able to fully appreciate a place if you're too engrossed in your inbox. So it's important to manage your time on the road and allow yourself moments to stop and explore.

If anywhere can be your office, why not make it a scenic cafe terrace in Thailand? © Henn Photography / Getty Images

The space race

Virtually anywhere can be a workplace today, whether it's a hotel lobby, a cafe or even a park bench. But a very clear sign of this new way of working can be seen in the rise of co-working spaces. These cater for those who enjoy the comforts of an office, with unlimited wi-fi, printing and, of course, free coffee. These shared office spaces give freelancers the chance to discuss ideas with like-minded people and they usually offer daily, monthly or yearly passes to use a desk or room. Co-working networks such as Copass and WeWork are growing at the speed of light, with new locations springing up in cities all over the world.

Hot spots include hipster havens like New York, London, Berlin and Amsterdam, but shared workspaces are also popular in backpacker hubs. Thanks to the low cost of living, international schooling and welcoming expat communities, Ubud in Bali and Medellín in Colombia are firm favourites with freelancers. Chiang Mai in Thailand, more known for its elaborate temples, is also growing as a centre for 'tech travellers' due to its mild climate and '*farang* (European)-friendly' services; it will host the Coworking Unconference (cuasia.co) in February 2017.

Check out 10 of the best workspaces worldwide...

betahaus has plenty of colourful rooms and breakout spaces for travellers in Berlin © Danique van Kesteren

betahaus, Berlin, Germany

Co-working space and cafe (betahaus.com/berlin).

Urban Place, Tel Aviv, Israel

In the heart of the 'start-up nation', on leafy Rothschild Blvd; offers Mediterranean views (urbanplace.me).

Punspace, Chiang Mai, Thailand

Has two locations, in Nimman and Tha Phae Gate, with snacks, coffee and 24/7 access (punspace.com).

Laptop, Paris, France

Cosy spaces and meeting rooms set in refurbished 19th-century digs (lelaptop.com/en).

Escape to the privacy of your own tree house at The Farm, New York © Sancar Ayalp

The Farm, New York, USA

Located in SoHo, this co-working haven even has a tree house (thefarmsoho.com).

Cowo | 360, Rome, Italy

Bright, modern and airy workspace in northeast Rome (workitout.it).

Cowo | 360, Rome, Italy

Bright, modern and airy workspace in northeast Rome (workitout.it).

Kindred Studios, Melbourne, Australia

Not just a workspace but also has studios, a bar and yoga classes (kindredstudios.com.au).

Kindred caters to all kinds of creatives with its own photography studio and more... © Cy Gorman

Thinking Hut, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Co-working space set in a converted stable building dating from 1912 (thethinkinghut.com).

Hubud, Ubud, Bali

Vibrant expat 'hub in Ubud' decked out in artisan bamboo, with views across rice fields (hubud.org).

Ondas, Medellin, Colombia

Cafe, co-working space and Spanish language school rolled into one (ondasmedellin.com).

SHARE THIS STORY:

A journey into genius

DAN SAVERY RAZ *Lonely Planet Writer* 27 OCTOBER 2015

Want to enter the world of a genius? Visiting the homes, workplaces and old haunts of Marie Curie, Shakespeare, Einstein and the like may not imbue you with an intellect that will change the world, but it will certainly get you thinking.

Take a trip with us to the places that put some of the greatest minds on the map.

Mozart's birthplace, Salzburg, Austria

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, the ultimate wunderkind, is synonymous with Salzburg. The childhood genius – who would later compose a host of classical masterpieces such as *The Marriage of Figaro*, *Flute* and *Requiem* – was born at Hagenauer House (also known as Geburtshaus) on 27 January 1756. The house, where he lived with his sister and parents until the age of 17, has long been a popular museum (mozarteum.at). Set on three floors, it exhibits a collection of Mozart's letters, family portraits and an array of historical musical instruments, including his childhood violin.

Curie's birthplace, Warsaw, Poland

Marie Curie, one of the greatest fighters against cancer, whose research continues to treat millions of patients worldwide, was a proud daughter of Warsaw. The first woman to win a Nobel Prize (1903) and be entombed in the Panthéon in Paris (1905), her heart was always in Poland. Famous for her pioneering research on radioactivity, the facade of her birthplace on Freta St has a mural depicting a baby holding a test tube with the two elements she discovered – polonium (named after Poland) and radium. This street is also home to the Maria Sklodowska-Curie Museum (muzeum-msc.pl), which tells the tale of her life through exhibits and films in Polish, English and French.

Freud's house, London, UK

OK, Sigmund Freud was Austrian and there is a sizeable museum in Vienna, but to really get into the mind of the founder of psychoanalysis, you need to go to London. Located on a quiet street in Hampstead, the Freud Museum (freud.org.uk) looks like a rather ordinary Victorian house from outside, yet inside you'll find Freud's extensive collection of Egyptian ornaments, shelves filled with books and his original psychoanalyst couch. Amazingly, Freud only lived in the house for one year – he fled to London in 1938 after the Nazi annexation of Austria and died in 1939 – but his artefacts were preserved by his daughter Anna Freud who lived in the house for 44 years.

Einstein's apartment, Bern, Switzerland

German-born physicist, philosopher of science and all-round icon for crazy-haired geniuses everywhere, Albert Einstein lived in Bern from 1902 to 1909, which he called the happiest and most productive years of his life. 1905 was his *annus mirabilis*, when he wrote four articles that changed modern physics and our views on space, time, and matter, including the special theory of relativity and his famous $E=mc^2$ equation. These earth-shattering papers were created in a modest apartment on Kramgasse, which is now the newly renovated Einstein House (einstein-bern.ch), home to his typewriter, telephone and some very well-worn passports.

Gandhi's ashram, Gujarat, India

The unassuming ashram of 'Mahatma' Ghandi. Image by Ullstein Bild / Getty

'Generations to come', Einstein said, 'will scarce believe that such a man as this one ever in flesh and blood walked upon this Earth'. Not a scientific genius, Mohandas K Ghandi, known as 'Mahatma' or 'great soul', experimented with truth. No other place tells the tale of the little man who defeated the British Empire with his philosophy of *satyagraha* (nonviolent civil resistance) better than the Sabarmati Ashram (gandhiashramsabarmati.org). Gandhi lived here from 1917 to 1930. The ashram houses the 'My Life is My Message' photo gallery, Gandhi's iconic *charkha* spinning wheel and 34,111 letters.

Kahlo's house, Mexico City, Mexico

A place of pilgrimage for art lovers, Casa Azul (Blue House) is where Frida Kahlo was born, lived and died (museofridakahlo.org.mx). The house, built by her father in 1904, is located in the Coyoacán neighbourhood. Today, people flock to see her paintings, clothes, jewellery, household objects and the pre-Columbian art collected by her husband Diego Riviera. Best-known for her surreal self-portraits, Kahlo has become a 20th-century heroine, representative of Mexican, indigenous and feminist art. As she stated, 'I was born a bitch. I was born a painter.'

Da Vinci's villa, Tuscany, Italy

A sign marking the birthplace of Leonardo da Vinci in Anchiano, Italy. Image by Ullstein Bild / Getty

Forget the *Mona Lisa* in Paris or *The Last Supper* in Milan, to see the real Leonardo da Vinci you need to go to the tiny village of Anchiano in Tuscany. It was here, among the vineyards and rolling hills, that the genius painter, architect and inventor drew his inspiration. The old country villa where Leonardo was born has been recently renovated and transformed into an interactive museum. Down the road is the Church of Santa Croce where Leonardo was baptised and the bigger Museo Leonardiano (museoleonardiano.it).

Marx's pub, Brussels, Belgium

Although he was born in Germany and died in England, it was in Belgium that Karl Marx, along with his comrade Friedrich Engels, penned *The Communist Manifesto*. Legend has it that Marx, who lived in Brussels from 1845 to 1847, wrote the manifesto in the smoky backroom of le Cyne (the Swan), a public house where he educated workers. Aside from the swan statue that still graces the doorway, Marx wouldn't recognise the opulent Brasserie de l'Ommegang that now occupies 9 Grand Place.

Shakespeare's Globe, London, UK

Spectators enjoy a performance of Shakespeare at the Globe Theatre. Image by Photofusion / Universal Images Group / Getty

What could be more English than standing with a beer in hand, watching a Shakespeare play by the River Thames? Only tea with the Queen. Yes, 2016 marks 400 years since the death of William Shakespeare and this theatre on London's South Bank will be celebrating with a host of special performances and exhibitions. A reconstruction of the original

Elizabethan playhouse from 1599, Shakespeare's Globe (shakespearesglobe.com) is an initiative by actor and director Sam Wanamaker and opened in 1997. It is now the undisputed home of Shakespeare in performance and also offers educational tours, a playground and a souvenir shop where you can buy a Hamlet hoodie. Word up!

Dalí's house, Port Lligat, Spain

Salvador Dali said, 'There is only one difference between a madman and me. I'm not mad.' Indeed, there is a fine line between insanity and genius, which is made evident by Dalí's bizarre house, Casa Museu Dali, in Port Lligat (salvador-dali.org/museus/casa-salvador-dali-portlligat). Located just outside Girona near the French border, the house began in 1930 as a simple fishing hut, but over the decades Dali added more rooms 'like a real biological structure'. The Spanish painter, famous for surrealist masterpieces, lived here until his wife Gala died in 1982. Packed with crazy objects (including a life-sized polar bear) and narrow corridors, it also has a tranquil courtyard, swimming pool and two egg-shaped towers.

Ten essential travel destinations for Beatlemaniacs

DAN SAVERY RAZ *Lonely Planet Writer* 28 OCTOBER 2013

It's 50 years since the Beatles landed in New York in 1964, changing pop music forever. Here's a Magical Mystery Tour with the Fab Four.

Bright lights of Reeperbahn in Hamburg at night. Image by Konrad Wothe / LOOK / Getty Images.

Reeperbahn, Hamburg, Germany

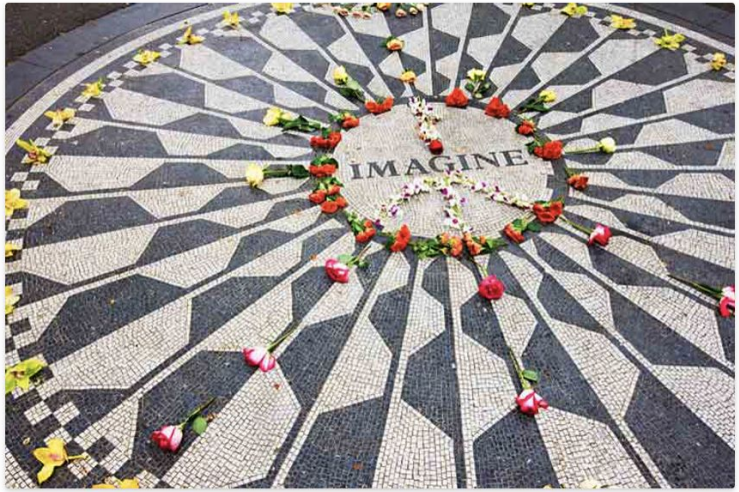
John Lennon once said, 'I might have been born in Liverpool but I grew up in Hamburg.' This raunchy city was so instrumental to the early Beatles that a plaza in the St Pauli district was named 'Beatles-Platz' in 2006. The plaza, paved black to resemble a vinyl record, is in the heart of the Reeperbahn, a street known for its nightlife and Hamburg's red-light district. From 1960 to 1962, the leather-clad Fab Five (including original bassist Stuart Sutcliffe) played hundreds of gigs in this naughty neighbourhood, though most of the clubs have closed down.

The Indra Musik Club (www.indramusikclub.com), site of the first Beatles gig in Hamburg, still hosts live music.

Cavern Club, Liverpool, England

No-one could have guessed that four working-class lads from Liverpool would become bigger than Elvis. But Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da, it happened. The earliest sounds of Beatlemania could be heard at the Cavern Club (www.cavernclub.org), a tiny live music venue that is still open today and has also hosted bands like the Who, Oasis and the Arctic Monkeys. For fans searching for the Beatles' roots – all you need is Liverpool. From Penny Lane to the former Strawberry Fields children's home behind John Lennon's aunt Mimi's house, the city is a living, breathing Beatles museum.

The Beatles Story Museum (www.beatlesstory.com) features a replica of the Cavern Club and a Fab 4D animated cinema show.



The Imagine Mosaic memorial to John Lennon, who lived nearby at the Dakota Building, in Strawberry Fields, Central Park, New York City. Image by Amanda Hall / Robert Harding World Imagery / Getty Images.

Strawberry Fields, New York City, USA

A simple memorial garden that has become a global symbol of peace, Strawberry Fields is one of the most tranquil corners of Central Park. Founded on 9 October 1985, the 45th anniversary of Lennon's birth, near the Dakota Building where he was killed, the garden was designed by Yoko Ono and architect Bruce Kelly. The black-and-white meditative mosaic made by Italian craftsmen revolves around one word: 'Imagine'. Lennon, who Ono said was born a New Yorker, moved to the Big Apple in 1971, first living in Greenwich Village, and even recorded an album called Sometime in New York City.

Lennon's only full-length solo concert was played at Madison Square Garden (www.thegarden.com), which hosts NBA games and big-name music acts.

Paradise Island, the Bahamas

Following the success of their first film *A Hard Day's Night*, Beatles director Richard Lester had a bigger budget for *Help!*. Cheekily, the Beatles requested the Bahamas as a location simply because they hadn't been there, so in February 1965 they arrived in the city of Nassau on New Providence Island, connected to Paradise Island by a bridge. However, the band didn't have a single day off on Paradise Island, which also features in the James Bond films *Casino Royale* and *Thunderball*. Paradise Island is now home to Vegas-style casino resorts and the Aquaventure Waterpark, with its mammoth Mayan Temple waterslide.

For information on hotel resorts and nightclubs, as well as diving and watersports, see www.nassauparadiseisland.com.

Rishikesh, India

After the Beatles met a giggling guru called the Maharishi (meaning 'enlightened spiritual one') in London in August 1967, they were eager to 'turn off their minds' with more transcendental meditation. So in February 1968 they joined Donovan, Mia Farrow and Mike Love from the Beach Boys at the Maharishi's ashram, located in the Valley of the Saints on the River Ganges in the foothills of the Himalayas. The Beatles stayed for six weeks and wrote much of *The White Album* here. Rishikesh is now considered the yoga capital of the world but is also a centre for whitewater rafting and treks in the Himalaya.

Trains run from Delhi to Haridwar (five hours), from where it is a 45-minute bus ride to Rishikesh. For direct overnight buses, see www.redbus.in.

Worshippers and Yogi Sing at Sunset on Ganga The Gate At Paramartha Niketan, Rishikesh. Image by Hutch Axilrod / Photographer's Choice / Getty Images.

Gibraltar

On 20 March 1969 John Lennon tied the knot with Yoko Ono on the Rock of Gibraltar, a small British territory off the southern coast of Spain. They had tried to get married in Paris a few days earlier but failed, so they flew into Gibraltar and went straight to the British Consulate to be married by a registrar. Lennon said the episode, as depicted in the song *The Ballad of John and Yoko*, was very romantic with the rock symbolising the foundation of their love.

Walk to Gibraltar across the border at La Línea in Spain (120km east of Malaga).

The Mirage, Las Vegas, USA

Although money can't buy you love it can buy you a ticket to *Love*, the Cirque du Soleil show. Featuring remixed Beatles music by original record producer Sir George Martin (the real fifth Beatle) and his son Giles, the show plays at a specially designed theatre at the Mirage, a sprawling hotel and casino resort on the Las Vegas Strip. The opening of *Love* in 2006 reunited Paul and Ringo with the widows of George and John, who unveiled a plaque in memory of their husbands. Visitors can take a behind-the-scenes tour of the theatre and party at the psychedelic Revolution Lounge.

Obertauern, Austria

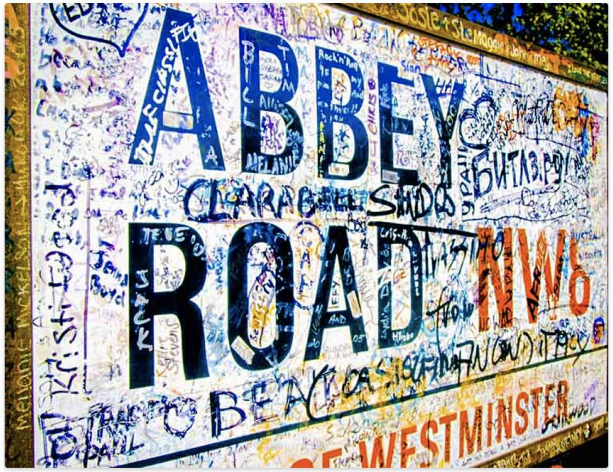
This ski resort in the Austrian Alps was chosen as a location to film part of the Beatles' second film, *Help!*. Legend has it that the Beatles were so stoned during filming that when George shouted his line 'Run, Ringo!' both Ringo and Paul ran over the next hill. Obertauern is located in the southern Bundesland region, 90km south of Salzburg, and is still a major ski and snowboarding resort. While filming here in 1965, the Beatles were based in the Edelweiss Hotel, which now has a spa and a children's ski centre and is close to the Lürzer Alm Chalet nightclub.

Salzburg is famous for another music giant, Mozart: each January it holds the Mozart Week Festival at the Mozarteum University.

Buenos Aires, Argentina

More commonly associated with tango than Ringo, the Argentinian capital, Buenos Aires, is actually home to one of the world's biggest collections of Beatles memorabilia. Opened in 2011, the Museo Beatle in Buenos Aires is the brainchild of lifelong fan Rodolfo Vazquez, who collected over 8500 rare items including records, gadgets and puppets. Next door to the museum is a clone of the Cavern Club, the Beatle Café and the Sala John Lennon stand-up comedy theatre. The museum is part of the Paseo La Plaza complex on Corrientes Avenue, the 'Broadway of Buenos Aires' lined with theatres, bars and tango clubs.

The Museo Beatle is open daily from 10am to midnight (from 2pm on Sunday); for details and tickets go to www.thecavern.com.ar.



Abbey Road road sign in London, covered with grafitti from Beatles fans. Image by Doug Armand / Photodisc / Getty Images.

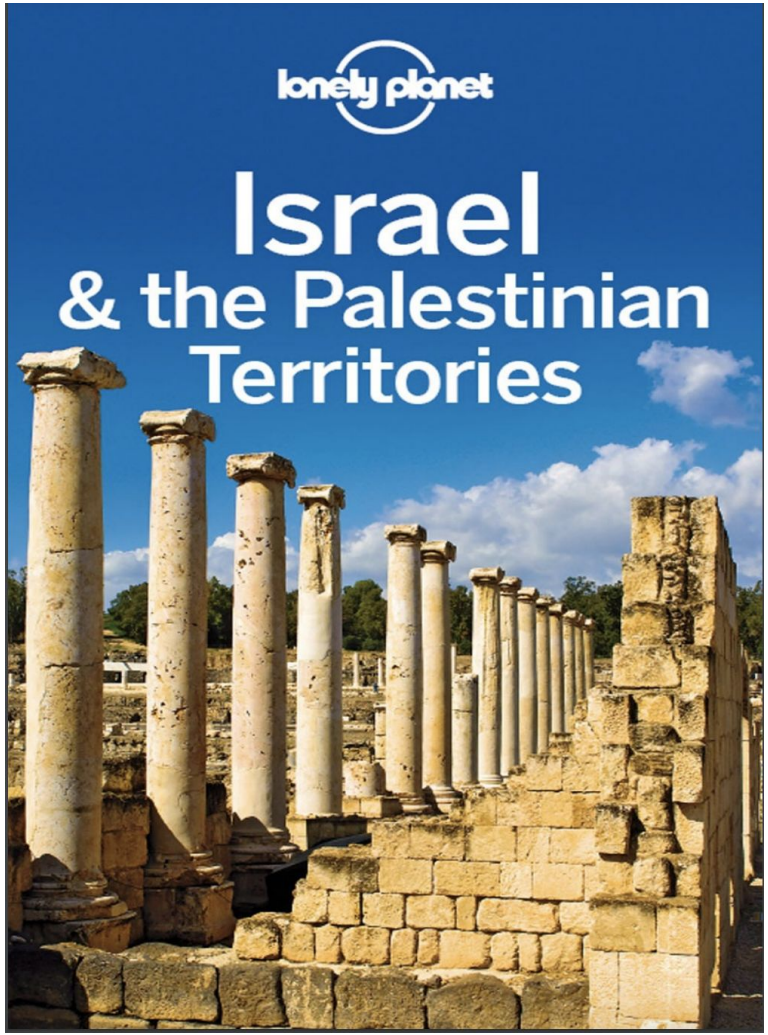
Abbey Road, London, England

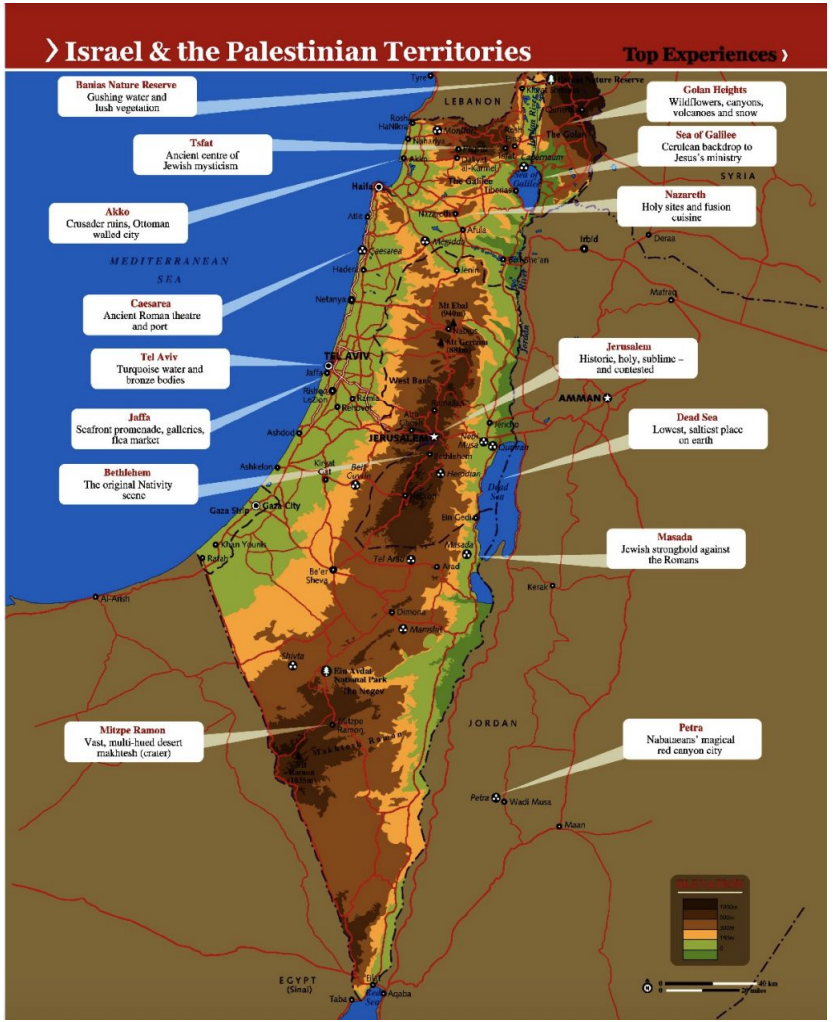
Initial ideas for the cover of the Beatles' final album included a photo shoot at Mount Everest but in the end they chose to take six photographs at the zebra crossing right outside EMI Studios in leafy north London. The iconic cover of Abbey Road, featuring a barefoot McCartney, has spawned a million imitations and a few conspiracy theories concerning the death of Paul. Abbey Road Studios, where Pink Floyd and Radiohead also recorded, is closed to the public but it does run a live webcam (www.abbeyroad.com/crossing) of the crossing, where fans infuriate the beeping cars on a daily basis.

The closest tube station to Abbey Road is St John's Wood. Nearby, the Beatles Coffee Shop offers Beatles walking tours.

LONELY PLANET

BOOKS


lonely planet
Israel
& the Palestinian Territories


Israel & the Palestinian Territories
Top Experiences
Banias Nature Reserve
Gushing water and lush vegetation
Tsfat
Ancient centre of Jewish mysticism
Akko
Crusader ruins, Ottoman walled city
Caesarea
Ancient Roman theatre and port
Tel Aviv
Turquoise water and bronze bodies
Jaffa
Seafront promenade, galleries, flea market
Bethlehem
The original Nativity scene
Golan Heights
Wildflowers, canyons, volcanoes and snow
Sea of Galilee
Cerulean backdrop to Jesus's ministry
Nazareth
Holy sites and fusion cuisine
Jerusalem
Historic, holy, sublime – and contested
Dead Sea
Lowest, saltiest place on earth
Masada
Jewish stronghold against the Romans
Mitzpe Ramon
Vast, multi-hued desert makhtesh (crater)
Petra
Nabataeans' magical red canyon city
LEBANON
SYRIA
JORDAN
EGYPT (Sinai)
MEDITERRANEAN SEA
TEL AVIV
JERUSALEM
AMMAN
Haifa
Netanya
Ashdod
Ashkelon
Gaza City
Gaza Strip
Khan Yunis
Rafah
Al-Arish
Be'er Sheva
Dimona
Arad
Eilat
Aqaba
Petra
Wadi Musa
Maan
Irbid
Mafraq
Jericho
Qumran
Dead Sea
West Bank

Avdat

11 The harsh climate and lack of rainfall were no barriers to the ancient Nabataeans who built Avdat (Click here) in the 3rd century BCE. Originally just a caravan stop from Petra to Gaza, Avdat's acropolis, bathhouse and catacombs were added later. Perched on top of a hill, the ruined city offers spectacular views of the surrounding desert through Roman arches and crumbled Byzantine church walls. Avdat's residents were also partial to a drop of wine and you can sample a modern merlot at the Carmey Avdat Winery across the highway.

MORIS KUSHELEVITCH/ALAMY ©

Tel Aviv Beaches

3 Just over 100 years ago, Tel Aviv was little more than sand dunes. Now TLV is a sprawling cosmopolitan city bursting with bars, bistros and boutiques but the beach is still the epicentre of life. Here, sunbathers bronze their bodies, while the more athletic swim, surf and play intense games of *matkot* (beach racquetball). Each beach (Click here) along the coast of Tel Aviv has its own personality – sporty, party, alternative, gay or religious – all against the deep-blue backdrop of the Mediterranean.

Makhtesh Ramon

13 Standing on the edge of Makhtesh Ramon (Click here) you can witness millions of years of evolution beneath your feet and barely imagine that this barren landscape was once a sea. Freezing cold at night, but baking during the day, the makhtesh, or crater as it's commonly known, is a place of extremes. The multicoloured rock formations of the Negev Highlands go on for as far as the eye can see and you can't help but wonder how such a small country can be home to such a vast secret.

Hunting for the Perfect Hummus

17 OK, hummus can be found all over the world today but in the Holy Land eating this chickpea dish is almost a religious experience. Popular with Israelis, Palestinians, Bedouins, Druze and just about everyone else in this neck of the woods, hummus here is hot, creamy and served with all kinds of herbs. Take a pilgrimage to Abu Ghosh or Old Jaffa to enjoy a plate of the beige stuff with tahina, fava beans, egg, onion, pita bread, felafel or all of the above.

EDDIE GERALD/LONELY PLANET IMAGES ©

Old Jaffa

18 While neighbouring Tel Aviv is only beginning its second century, Jaffa (Click here) has some 4000 years behind it. Jaffa's history reads like a who's who of conquerors – the Greeks, Romans, Crusaders, Napoleon, Ottomans and British all used this Mediterranean port, once the gateway to the Middle East. Now a mix of Arab and Jewish neighbourhoods, Jaffa is a great place to smoke a nargileh pipe, haggle for antiques in the flea market or take a cycling trip along the redeveloped coastline.

SIMON FOALE/LONELY PLANET IMAGES ©

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Tel Aviv

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Includes »

Sights
Beaches
Activities
Courses
Festivals & Events
Sleeping
Eating
Drinking
Entertainment
Shopping
Jaffa
Herzliyya
Netanya
Ramla
Activities

Why Go?

While the State of Israel hits the headlines, the state of Tel Aviv sits back with a cappuccino. Lovingly nicknamed the Bubble, Tel Aviv (TLV) is a city of outdoor cafes, leafy boulevards and long sandy beaches. A favourite with Europeans looking for some year-round sun, Tel Aviv is fast becoming a bubble of boutiques, bistros and brasseries. All over the city old Bauhaus buildings are getting a well-needed facelift and skyscrapers aspire to build a kind of Manhattan in the Middle East. Yet the real Tel Aviv is found in humble hummus joints, wine bars hidden down alleyways, fresh-fruit-shake stalls, quiet memorial gardens and chaotic marketplaces.

With its plethora of pick-up bars, nightclubs and all-night parties, Tel Aviv has been labelled ‘Sin City’. But appearances can be deceptive. The diversity of its people, music, museums, art galleries and graffiti all testify that Tel Aviv has soul.

When to Go

Mar–May Tel Aviv blooms in springtime with bright bougainvillea flowers.

Jun–mid-Sep Party at the Gay Pride Parade (June) and cool down at the beach or pool.

Dec–early Mar Cold with sporadic rain; the city is still blessed with winter sun.

Best Places to Eat

» Ali Caravan (Click here) Raphael (Click here) Adora (Click here) Benedict (Click here) Goocha (Click here)

Best Places to Stay

» Center Hotel (Click here) Beit Immanuel (Click here) Hotel Montefiore (Click here) Old Jaffa Hostel (Click here) Art Plus Hotel (Click here)

Lie of the Land

Tel Aviv is very easy to get around, as its bustling central area focuses on five parallel north–south streets that follow 6km of seafront. Nearest the sand is Herbert Samuel Esplanade, while the hotel-lined HaYarkon St lies a block inland. East of HaYarkon St is Ben Yehuda St, home to backpackers and souvenir shops, and the fourth parallel street is the trendy Dizengoff St, which marks the geographic centre of the city. Further east again, Ibn Gabirol St forms the eastern boundary of the city centre. The Neve Tzedek and Florentine districts mark the southernmost reaches of the city centre before Jaffa, while Park HaYarkon and the Old Port (Namal) mark the northernmost.

BICYCLE BOOM

Being a compact city, there is no better way to see Tel Aviv-Jaffa than on two wheels. The Big Orange (Tel Aviv's answer to the Big Apple) now has over 100km of dedicated bike paths running along many of the major thoroughfares. There's a bunch in Park HaYarkon, and one follows the coastline from a bit north of Sde Dov airport south, via Jaffa, to the suburb of Bat Yam. A free map of the bike-path network can be picked up at tourist information offices. For more information Click here.

In 2011, the municipality introduced **Tel-O-Fun** *(✆ 6070; www.tel-o-fun.co.il)*, a citywide bike-rental scheme similar to Paris' Vélib'. You pick up and drop off the green bicycles in over 75 docking stations; the first half hour of use is free. Subscriptions cost 14NIS (daily) and 60NIS (weekly); pay with your credit card at any Tel-O-Fun station.

Tel Aviv's Best Beaches

» Hilton Beach (Click here) is the city's unofficial gay beach and is popular with dog owners. Although crowded on weekends, during the week it is calmer and can be a great spot for sunset swimming or surfing.

» Gordon Beach (Click here) in the centre is close to most of the major seafront hotels and has beach volleyball courts, a small outdoor gym and plenty of butch bronze bodies playing serious games of *matkot* (beach tennis).

» Alma Beach (Click here), nearer Jaffa, is where the cool kids from Florentine come to chill, smoke a nargileh pipe and drink a beer.

THE NAME GAME

Tel Aviv streets are generally named after people and this eclectic mix includes names from Britain (Allenby), Eastern Europe (Jabotinsky) and Moorish Spain (Ibn Gabirol).

Fast Facts

» Area: 51.4 sq km
» Synagogues: 544
» Bauhaus buildings: over 4000
» Age of Jaffa: over 4000

Boutique Beer

» The Dancing Camel (Click here) brews its own pale ales and stouts.
» Norma Jeane (Click here) offers a range of international beers on tap.
» Porter & Sons (Click here) sells boutique European and Israeli beers.

Resources

» Tourism office: www.visit-tlv.com
» Municipality: www.telaviv.gov.il/english
» Tel Aviv guide: www.telavivguide.net
» Tel Aviv city: www.telavivcity.com

Old Port (Namal)
Port Hotel
Metzitzim Beach
Nordau Beach
Hilton Beach
Tel Aviv Hilton
Gordon Beach
Frishman Beach
Trumpeldor Beach
Jerusalem Beach
Ge'ula Beach
Banana Beach
MEDITERRANEAN SEA
Charles Clore Park
MANSHIVE
YEMENITE QUARTER
FLORENTINE
Central Bus Station
Reading Terminal
Old Port
Park HaYarkon
Rokach Ave
Ayalon Highway
Yarkon River
Tel Aviv Port
Nordau Ave
Bialik St
Herzl St
Kaplan St
Ibn Gabirol St
Dizengoff St
Ben Gurion Ave
Arlozorov St
Tel Aviv Savidor Merkaz Train Station
Arlozorov Bus Terminal
Ha'Yarkon St
Ahad Ha'Am St
Yitzhak Rabin Memorial Sq
See South City Centre Map
See North City Centre Map
Rikkar Dizengoff (Dizengoff Sq)
Tel Aviv Museum of Art
Azrieli Observatory
Azrieli Centre
Crowne Plaza City Centre Hotel
HaShalom Train Station
Habima Sq
Allenby/North Main Road South
Ha'Arba'a St
Ha'Yetsira St
Ha'Shmona St
Ha'Tchelet St
Ha'Tikva St
Ha'Uman St
Ha'Yam St
Ha'Zahav St
Ha'Zayit St
Ha'Zemer St
Ha'Zeitim St
Ha'Zikaron St
Ha'Zionut St
Ha'Zmorot St
Ha'Zoref St
Ha'Zvi St
Ha'Zvia St
Ha'Zvuah St
Ha'Zvuot St
Ha'Zvuim St
Ha'Zvuit

translation of Theodor Herzl's novel *Altneuland* (it's also mentioned in Ezekiel 3:15).

ECLECTIC BEGINNINGS

The building of Tel Aviv ground to a halt when the Ottoman administration expelled the Jewish population from the Tel Aviv area in 1917. But after WWI the British Mandate in Palestine made it possible for the city to resume its exponential growth. Arab riots in Jaffa in 1921 sent many Jews fleeing to Tel Aviv, swelling the population to around 34,000 by 1925. In the mid-1930s, more anti-Zionist rioting in Jaffa caused the city's entire Jewish population to flee north; many refugees settled in shacks along the seashore. The boycott of Jewish passengers and cargo by the Jaffa's Arab port workers led Tel Aviv to build its very own port.

Tel Aviv grew quickly to accommodate the newcomers, but development veered, on occasion, erratically away from the simple, logical, garden-city planning. Allenby St, designated the new main thoroughfare, was intended to run north–south, parallel to the seafront, but was diverted in order to reach a coffeehouse built on stilts over the beach. Likewise, the Neve Sha'anan district in the south was laid out in the shape of the seven-branched Jewish menorah simply because of the symbolism. Meanwhile, the immigrants kept on coming. The 1930s saw waves of arrivals from overseas, many fleeing Nazi Germany, and by 1939 Tel Aviv's population had reached 160,000, one-third of the country's total Jewish population.

As war clouds gathered in Europe, Jewish architects who had fled Nazi Germany set about turning Tel Aviv into a Bauhaus-inflected 'White City'. With the outbreak of WWII in 1939, Tel Aviv played host to Allied troops while simultaneously serving as a centre of Zionist resistance against Britain's anti-immigration policies. The city was bombed by Mussolini's air force in 1940.

In late 1947 and into 1948, as the British prepared to pull out of Palestine, tensions rose on the Jaffa border, with Arab snipers firing at Jews from the minaret of the Hassan Bek Mosque. The Haganah and Irgun (Jewish underground forces) responded by laying siege to Jaffa and by spring 1948 much of its Arab population fled, leaving the old port city in the hands of the newly declared State of Israel.

TRIALS & TRIBULATIONS

In April 1949 Tel Aviv and Jaffa were joined together to create a single municipality.

The decades after Israeli independence saw Tel Aviv expanding in every direction, turning neighbouring towns such as Ramat Gan and Holon into bustling suburbs. Early restrictions on the height of buildings had to be amended when authorities realised the only place to go was up – and that if Tel Aviv didn't get the skyscrapers neighbouring Ramat Gan would.

During the First Gulf War (1991), greater Tel Aviv was hit by about three dozen Iraqi Scud missiles, damaging thousands of apartments. And in the mid-1990s the city centre was hit by a wave of Palestinian suicide bomb attacks. In 1995, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated by a right-wing Orthodox Jew during a peace rally at what is now Rabin Sq. Life in the city looked bleak – at least for a while.

BOUNCING BACK

Tel Avivians, however, are survivors. Despite the implosion of the late-1990s dot-com bubble and more than a dozen suicide bombings during the second Palestinian intifada – targeting civilians on buses, in cafes and at nightclubs, they left Tel Aviv's beach-based tourism industry in tatters – the early 21st century saw a rejuvenated economy largely based on high-tech wealth. Young Israelis started to move back to TLV and older neighbourhoods such as Neve Tzedek and Jaffa's Ajami underwent gentrification. Ever-taller buildings sprouted, with high-profile residential projects such as Phillipe Starck's prestigious Yoo Towers creeping up into the skyline.

Over the past decade, Tel Aviv has reinvented itself as an international-level dining destination, with a wealth of top-end brasseries and restaurants, a vibrant nightlife, a busy gay scene and shopping opportunities galore. In 2003 it gleefully accepted Unesco World Heritage status for its (sometimes dilapidated) Bauhaus buildings, and in 2009 the city celebrated its 100th birthday with 100km of bike paths and a series of extravagant street parties and events. The city's rejuvenation continued during the second decade of the 21st century – ravishing new projects include an expansive boardwalk linking Tel Baruch Beach (north of the Yarkon River) with Jaffa and Bat Yam; and the Old Railway Station in Neve Tzedek, now a boutique tourist centre.

Though infrastructural obstacles remain (lack of parking, stray cats, litter and poor public transport), Tel Aviv's reinvention has seen New York journalist David Kauffman describe it as the Mediterranean 'capital of

cool'. According to Mercer, in 2011 Tel Aviv ranked as the most expensive city in the Middle East (and 24th in the world).

Although since 2008 Tel Aviv has missed the worst of the economic crisis that engulfed North America and much of Europe, the sky-high prices of food, education and housing led to a 'Summer of Discontent' in 2011, with thousands taking to the streets calling for social justice.

Dangers & Annoyances

Despite the spectre of suicide attacks (the most recent of which occurred in 2006), Tel Aviv is a remarkably safe city, and even lone women will rarely feel intimidated walking its central streets at night. The area around the old central bus station, Neve Sha'anan, has a reputation as a haunt for prostitutes and drug dealers, but it's also the home turf of many foreign workers and African refugees, remaining lively – thanks to legions of Indians, Filipinos, Thais, Romanians, Eritreans and Sudanese – well into the wee hours.

As when visiting almost any city, it pays to keep your valuables locked up in your hotel room safe or deposited with the hostel receptionist. When hitting the sands, never leave your bag, wallet, camera or mp3 player unattended (you can usually find a congenial neighbour to keep an eye on your belongings while you're taking a dip).

For general tips on personal safety Click here.

TEL AVIV IN…

Two Days

Kick off day one with a stroll along the seafront to familiarise yourself with the city and perhaps have a quick dip in the sea. Stop for lunch and boutique buys on fashionable Sheinken St before exploring the more earthy wares of the **Carmel Market** Offline map Google map and the scents and sights of the ramshackle **Yemenite Quarter**. In the evening, stroll around arty **Neve Tzedek** and end the night with a dance performance at the **Suzanne Dellal Centre** Offline map Google map. The next day head down to swanky Rothschild Blvd to visit **Independence Hall** and the redesigned **Haganah Museum**, then spend the afternoon in **Jaffa** bartering in the **flea market**, before stopping off for dinner at one of Jaffa's great **restaurants**.

Four Days

An extra couple of days will give you time to rent a bicycle and ride through **Park HaYarkon** to Ramat Aviv, where you can pop in to see **Beit Hatefutsoth** at Tel Aviv University. You could also go out of town to spend a peaceful afternoon on a beach in **Herzliyya** or **Netanya**. When you get back to Tel Aviv, go for dinner at one of our recommendations and rev up for a nightclub in **Florentine** or at the **Old Port**.

Sights

Aside from beaches, Tel Aviv sports a number of interesting museums and a selection of neighbourhoods well worth a wander. Most sights of interest are within walking distance of the city centre. You'll need a short hop by bus or taxi to venture out to the attractions of outlying Ramat Aviv, home to Tel Aviv University and its excellent museums. Jaffa, to the south, is linked to Tel Aviv by one long boardwalk, which makes a wonderful stroll (unless during midday in August).

CENTRAL CITY CENTRE

If you're looking for the hub of Tel Aviv's action, head direct to the busy intersection between Allenby, King George and Sheinken Sts. Here, where six shopping streets collide, is a great place to begin your Tel Aviv explorations, with a trip through the covered Carmel Market, a shopping spree on chic Sheinken St or a browse of the craft market on Nahalat Binyamin St.

Alternatively, head into the quieter Yemenite Quarter, where an older world awaits, or historic Bialik St, home to a few unique museums.

Carmel Market

MARKET

Offline map Google map

The Carmel Market (Shuk HaCarmel) is, in many ways, the frenetic heartbeat of Tel Aviv. The total opposite of air-conditioned shopping malls, it's an old passageway marketplace, squeezed between the Yemenite Quarter and Nahalat Binyamin St.

Here, passionate, mainly Sephardi men and women shout (and sometimes sing) while selling everything from fresh flowers to piles of paprika. This bubbling cauldron of commerce offers the cheapest and freshest food around. So leave your manners at the entrance and push on past the fake fashion stalls to the aromatic, enticing stalls of fruit and veg, nuts, hot breads, fresh fish, olives and spices beyond.

The best prices are to be had as the market closes, especially around 3pm or 4pm Friday, when everyone wants to sell up before Shabbat.

There are plans to return Dizengoff Sq, named after Meir's wife Tzina, to street level.

FREE Dan Contemporary

GALLERY

Offline map Google map

(); 03-524 3968; www.dancontemporary.com; 36 Gordon St; 11am-6.30pm Mon-Thu, to 2pm Fri) Providing a blank white canvas for the finest Israeli art and photography, the Dan is compact, contemporary and cool. Check the website for details of the latest exhibition.

East City Centre

Tel Aviv quietens down as you head east, an area of the city basically bordered, to the west, by Rabin Sq, which plays host to the city's major celebrations, music concerts and protests. South of here is the redeveloped Habima Sq, home to the Habima Theatre.

STREET WISE

Walk around south and central Tel Aviv and you may begin to notice strange things happening around you. Walls appear to talk, move and even tell stories. In recent years, derelict and disused buildings have become a backdrop for the city's astonishing street art.

The antithesis of billboard advertising, street art aims to reclaim public spaces, creating colourful and often thought-provoking images, free for all to see, that is, before the municipality covers them up. From tagging names and simple slogans, Tel Aviv street artists have branched out into complex compositions displaying various styles and techniques (aerosol, acrylic, pasting and stencils).

The backstreets of Florentine provide the best place to catch a glimpse of this underground graffiti world and the best-known name is undoubtedly Know Hope, Israel's very own Banksy. Know Hope has created sad and uplifting images featuring his 'everyman' character, with his trademark long arms and open heart. Now an international artist in his own right, Know Hope has published two books and even exhibited at the Helena Rubinstein Pavilion.

Other artists such as Broken Fingaz, Dede, Foma, Klone and Zero Cents have followed Know Hope's success into the gallery. But the real home of this daring and sometimes disturbing art is on the street.

Tel Aviv Museum of Art

MUSEUM

Offline map Google map

TEL AVIV'S BAUHAUS HERITAGE

Tel Aviv has more sleek, clean-lined Bauhaus (International Style) buildings than any other city in the world, which is why it was declared a Unesco World Heritage Site in 2003.

Tel Aviv's **White City heritage** *(www.white-city.co.il)* is easy to spot, even through the modifications and dilapidation of the past 70 years. Look for structures characterised by horizontal lines, curved corners (eg of balconies), 'thermometer stairwells' (stairwells with a row of vertical windows to provide light) and a complete absence of ornamentation.

Founded by the architect Walter Gropius and later led by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, the 'Bauhaus school' – active in the German cities of Weimar, Dessau and Berlin from 1919 to 1933 – had a huge influence on modernist design. The Nazis detested the Bauhaus style, considering it 'cosmopolitan' and 'degenerate' and forced the school to close when they came to power.

The ideas and ideals of Bauhaus were brought to Palestine by German-Jewish architects fleeing Nazi persecution. As Tel Aviv developed in the 1930s (following a street plan drawn up in the late 1920s by the Scottish urban planner Sir Patrick Geddes), some 4000 white-painted Bauhaus buildings – the quintessence of mid-20th-century moderism – were built.

Today, many of these buildings are in need of a lick of paint, but several hundred have already been renovated and each year more are being restored to their former glory. Superb examples of the Bauhaus style include the **Cinema Hotel** *(Dizengoff Sq)*, **Soskin House** *(12 Lillenblum St)* and many of the structures along Rothschild Ave.

The **Bauhaus Centre** Offline map Google map *(03-522 0249; www.bauhaus-center.com; 99 Dizengoff St; 10am-7.30pm Sun-Thu, to 2.30pm Fri)* sells a variety of architecture-related books and plans of the city, along with postcards of Tel Aviv in its Bauhaus heyday, and runs a **walking tour** starting at its shop every Friday at 10am. A free English-language guided **Bauhaus tour** departs from 46 Rothschild Blvd every Saturday at 11am.

If you've already experienced the hush that descends on Jerusalem as Shabbat is welcomed in – and wondered what on earth you're going to do with no ATMs, restaurants, shops or sights in operation for a full 24 hours or so – don't despair: simply go to Tel Aviv and spend Shabbat the secular way.

Here, many shops and felafel stalls close on Friday afternoon and don't open again until Saturday evening or Sunday morning, but that seems to be the extent of the city's nod to the holy day of rest. On Friday evening, bars, restaurants and clubs are packed to the rafters until the dawn. Saturdays see locals thronging to the beach, lazing at cafes with the Friday newspapers, and generally being active throughout the day. Simply head outside to the city's streets and you'll easily be able to find a frothy *cafe hafuch* (cappuccino), schnitzel sandwich or bowl of pasta. Plus, there are AM:PM mini-supermarkets (open 24/7) dotted all over the city in case you forgot to pick something up.

You will notice less noise on the streets as there are no buses, but there are sheruts and taxis if you need to get around.

Eating

Tel Aviv is like one giant cafe and eating out is a daily occurrence for many of its residents. In fact, at any hour its restaurants and cafes are so busy with chatty clientele that it causes one to wonder if anybody in Tel Aviv (apart from the waiters) is actually working at all.

There is no shortage of choice for the hungry (indeed, we could fill this entire book with Tel Aviv's eating options). With places old and new, from budget to blow-out, Tel Aviv's restaurant scene is the most exciting and constantly metamorphosing of any in Israel, if not the Middle East.

Coinciding with the boutique makeover that's sweeping all over TLV, there is a rising crop of 'chef restaurants' and swanky, minimalist bistros. But don't worry if you are on a budget; there are still plenty of cheap street food booths offering felafel, hummus, sabich (Iraqi-style felafel lookalike with deep-fried eggplant and potatoes instead of chickpea balls), shwarma, fresh-squeezed fruit juice, pizza by the slice, frozen yoghurt and *bourekas* (stuffed Turkish-style savoury pastries). So follow the crowds and your nose, and don't be afraid to deviate from our suggestions to find your own culinary marvel.

Prices are generally equivalent to, or slightly below, the UK or USA: a snack costs around 20NIS per person, while a two-course dinner, with a drink or two, at one of Tel Aviv's top-end affairs could run to around 300NIS.

If you're self-catering, the best fresh fruit and vegetables in town are sold at the Carmel Market. Convenience supermarkets are found all over Tel Aviv – most belong to the two small chains of AM-PM and Tiv Taam in the city, which offer a good selection, almost-reasonable prices (considering this is Tel Aviv) and late-night hours.

Central City Centre

Sonia Gatzel Shapira $$ — CAFE

Offline map Google map

(1 Almonit Alley; meals from 35NIS; 9am-late Mon-Thu, 8am-6pm Fri, 11am-late Sat;) Named after the woman this alleyway was originally built for, Sonia is a cute cafe decked out in vintage furniture, grooving to jazz or R&B music. It has a large sunny patio garden out the back and a mainly vegetarian menu, featuring pastas and sandwiches. Try its *shakshuka* (egg and tomato stew) or Moroccan bread.

Carmella Ba'Nachala $$$ — INTERNATIONAL

Offline map Google map

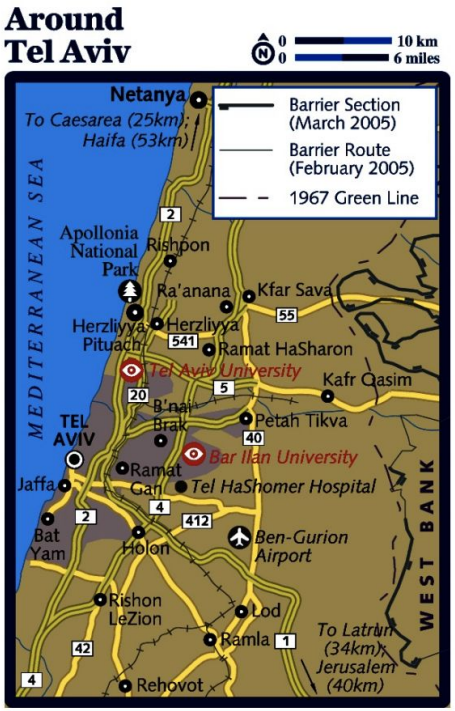
(03-516 1417; 46 Har Tavor St, cnr Rambam St; mains 70-120NIS; noon-midnight Sun-Thu, 10am-midnight Fri & Sat) Tucked away in an old colonial-style white building near the Nahalat Binyamin market you'll find this chic oasis of silver cutlery and starched white tablecloths. The menu changes frequently, utilising herbs, spices and pomegranate seeds to spice up fish and meat dishes. The daily business-lunch menu, served from Sunday to Thursday between noon and 5pm, gives you the chance to sample the chef's delights with a reduced price tag.

Orna and Ella $$ — CAFE

Offline map Google map

(03-525 2085; 33 Sheinken St; dishes from 58NIS; 10am-midnight Sun-Thu, to 5pm Fri, 11am-midnight Sat;) Decorated in stark white design, this Tel Aviv institution serves homey gourmet cuisine and is famed for its delicious desserts. It uses the freshest ingredients brought straight from the market and everything is made from scratch. The menu changes weekly, but you can count on the seared salmon, smoked duck, sage-infused pasta and sweet potato pancakes.

HaKosem $ — ISRAELI



Around Tel Aviv

The greater Tel Aviv area, known as the Gush Dan region, is comprised of a web of affluent and not-so-affluent suburbs. The highlight of the region is the long stretches of golden beaches between Tel Aviv and Netanya, particularly nice around the upscale Herzliyya Pituach, but you won't be alone; Israelis flock to the coast, especially on weekends. South from Tel Aviv, historic Jaffa, with its 4000-year-old harbour, is another pleasant break from the hustle and bustle. Among the destinations listed in this section, Jaffa is the only one within walking distance from Tel Aviv; the rest are easy day trips and can be visited by local bus or train from Tel Aviv.

WORTH A TRIP

RISHON LEZION

Rishon LeZion (First to Zion), just 20km south of Tel Aviv, makes for a pleasant half-day trip. Founded in 1882 by European Jewish immigrants, the Old City is based on Rothschild St and includes the **Great Synagogue**, built in 1885 and registered as a warehouse because the Turkish authorities wouldn't allow the Jews a place of worship. Across the street from the synagogue the quaint **History Museum** *(✆ 03-959 8862, 1621; 2 Ahad Ha'am St; admission 10NIS; ☼ 9am-2pm Sun-Thu, to 1pm Fri)* is housed in a collection of period buildings that lend insight into the pioneer spirit that drove the early Zionist settlers and the obstacles they faced. Nearby you can stroll around the **Village Park**, passing the large **water tower** (built in 1898) and **village well**. Once famous for the Carmel Winery (now closed to the public), modern Rishon has sprawled out into a large industrial zone, currently home to Israel's only Ikea.

Dan buses run a service from Dizengoff St to Rishon (Bus 129, 6.80NIS) or you can take an Egged bus (Bus 84 or 163, 6.60NIS) from the central bus station. Trains (15NIS) from any of the three Tel Aviv stations also come to Rishon, departing every 20 minutes.

Jaffa

✆ 03 / POP 46,000

With its ancient white fortress walls, tall palm trees and sea views, gentrified Old Jaffa (Yafo) is a firm stop-off for flocks of tourists in the summer. But it wasn't always so. For around 4000 years, while Tel Aviv was nothing more than sand dunes, it was Jaffa that stood as one of the great ports of the Mediterranean. Jaffa's small harbour doesn't get much seafaring traffic these days but its hangars are being transformed into new cafes, shops and art galleries. The town itself, which centres on a bustling flea market, still has the feel of a hectic hub, where Jews, Muslims and Christians intermingle. Compared to its modernised

neighbour Tel Aviv, Jaffa can come across as a little shabby (expect the odd pile of rubble and unfinished building work), but this is all part of its unpretentious charm. If staying nearby, Jaffa is a great little town for strolling, trying some Arabic food or smoking a nargileh pipe.

History

Founded, according to the Hebrew Bible, by Japheth, the son of Noah, the Israelite port of 'Joppa' came to prominence during the time of Solomon, while the temple was being built in Jerusalem. The town was later conquered by the Assyrians (701 BCE), Persians (586 BCE) and the Hellenistic Empire (382 BCE) but was neglected by the Romans, who had their own port at Caesarea.

The city fell to Islamic rule in 640 CE, but when Richard the Lionheart heard that Salah-ad-Din was executing Christians in Jaffa, the Crusaders took the city and ruled until the Mameluke invasion in 1291. The Ottomans then ruled for over 400 years, briefly interrupted in 1799 by Napoleon – at the time, Jaffa was just a small village. Jews began to move here again in the 1820s and by the end of the century, Jaffa had become a major gateway for boatloads of arriving Jewish immigrants. The British General Allenby drove out the Turks in 1917 and tensions between Jewish arrivals and the existing Arab community boiled over into full-blown anti-Jewish riots in 1921, 1929 and 1936, causing most Jews to flee. The decisive fighting of 1948 saw the defeat and subsequent flight of the majority of Jaffa's Arab population. During the 1950s, Old Jaffa became a retrogressive crime area, nicknamed 'the Wasteland'.

Since that time, Old Jaffa has been extensively renovated and developed as a centre of culture with an artists quarter, theatres, craft shops and cafes. The Arab district of Ajami, further south, has lots of Ottoman homes and crumbling charm, though there are a growing number of new apartment buildings in Jaffa catering for the overspill of Tel Aviv.

Hebrew) illustrates the fact that there is indeed a fine line between genuine antiques and junk. If you are looking for a Persian rug, Moroccan teaset, beautiful painting or just an old TV, then it's all here. You can barter for everything at the *shuk* and there are occasional outdoor auctions, attracting huge crowds. The *shuk* is between Olei Zion St and Beit Eshul St. Every Thursday night in the summer until midnight, the *shuk* becomes a stage for outdoor entertainers including jugglers and live bands.

Jaffa Port

One of the oldest known harbours in the world, the port of Jaffa was mentioned by Hiram, King of Tyre, in conversation with Solomon (II Chronicles 2:16). It is also said to be where Jonah set sail from on the way to his fateful meeting with the whale (Jonah 1:3). For centuries Palestine's main port, Jaffa is where Jewish pilgrims to the Holy Land first arrived en route to Jerusalem.

Today, Jaffa Port, which was nothing but empty warehouses for decades, has recently been renovated, with the hope of injecting the area with a new lease of life. Like much of Israel, progress isn't instantaneous, but cafes, restaurants, galleries and shops are slowly beginning to pop up. One notable addition is the **Jaffa Salon** Offline map Google map *(Hangar 2; 11am-6pm Mon-Fri, to 8pm Sat)*, exhibiting over 200 works of Palestinian art.

Ajami

It's worth a walk down the hill from Old Jaffa or up Yefet St to the Ajami district, where gentrified Ottoman-era homes still exist side-by-side with tiny, ramshackle fishermen's shacks, for a taste of the real lives of Jaffa's Arab residents. Notorious for crime and drugs, the area featured in the Oscar-nominated 2010 film *Ajami*.

Ajami's seafront now opens out into a large green park and a boardwalk that connects Old Jaffa to Bat Yam. It makes a great place for a picnic, game of frisbee or a bike ride.

DON'T MISS

HATACHANA

After decades of dereliction, the historic **Old Railway Station** *(HaTachana;* Click here *;*

Top of section

The Negev

Includes »

Arad
Be'er Sheva
Around Be'er Sheva
Sde Boker
Mitzpe Ramon
The Arava
Eilat
Around Eilat

Why Go?

The Negev Desert, often bypassed by travellers hurrying to Eilat, is much more than just sand. Look closely between the rocks of the wadis (valleys) and you will find water and even wine. The Negev Highlands region is also home to so many vineyards that it now has its own wine route. Today, ecologists from all over the world come to the kibbutzim of Sde Boker and the Arava to study solar energy and water treatment. But this isn't new. Two thousand years earlier, the Nabataeans cultivated grapes and practically invented desert irrigation, which can still be seen at the ancient ruins of Shivta, Mamshit and Avdat.

This region, comprising 62% of Israel's land mass, may seem sparse but it offers a world of adventure, including mountain hikes, camel treks, 4WD desert drives and Red Sea diving. Yet perhaps the biggest secret of the Negev is Makhtesh Ramon, a crater-like wilderness, which feels like another planet.

When to Go

Eilat

Mar–May, late Sep–Nov The best time for desert treks; sunny at daytime but cold at night.

Aug The Red Sea Jazz Festival adds coolness to a sweltering Eilat summer.

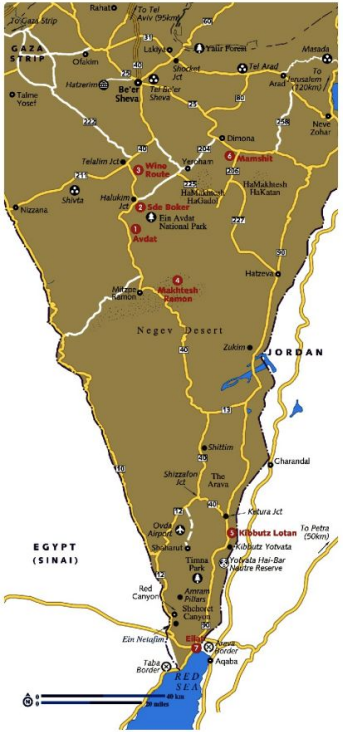
Dec–Feb A rare rainstorm can cause fleeting waterfalls to appear at Wadi Zin, Sde Boker.

Best Places to Eat

» Neot Semadar Inn (Click here) Haksa (Click here) Ginger Asian Kitchen & Bar (Click here) Last Refuge (Click here) Chez Eugene (Click here)

Best Places to Stay

» Green Backpackers (Click here) Kibbutz Lotan Guesthouse (Click here) Desert Lodge (Click here) Orchid Reef Hotel (Click here) Kfar Hanokdim (Click here)



The Negev Highlights

❶ Step back more than 2000 years by exploring the Nabataean hilltop ruins of **Avdat** (boxed text, Click here) ❷Trek across the Wadi Zin desert valley to the freshwater spring of Ein Akev near **Sde Boker** (Click here) ❸Sample some fine Negev merlot on the **Wine Route** (Click here) in the Negev Highlands between Be'er Sheva and Mitzpe Ramon ❹Witness millions of years of evolution beneath your feet from the lookout at **Makhtesh Ramon** (Click here) ❺Learn about ecodesign, try water shiatsu and go birdwatching on the Arava sand dunes at **Kibbutz Lotan** (Click here) ❻Sleep in a *tukul* (Ethiopian-style tepee) at the foot of the ruined city of **Mamshit** (boxed text, Click here) ❼Jump and splash on the Red Sea waves as you try kitesurfing in **Eilat** (Click here)

Arad

08 / POP 23,400

Situated on a high plateau, between Be'er Sheva and the Dead Sea, Arad itself doesn't offer too much to do but is a popular place to stay for those visiting nearby Masada (Click here).

Directly opposite the tall birds of prey sculptures at the entrance to Arad, the Eshet Lot Artists' Quarter is in an abandoned industrial zone 2km southwest of town. The highlight here is the small **Glass Museum** *(08-995 3388; www.warmglassil.com; 11 Sadan St; 10am-1pm Sun-Wed, 10am-2pm Thu & Sat)* opened by artist Gideon Friedman.

DON'T MISS

TEL ARAD

Founded in the 3rd century BCE, Tel Arad is the country's best example of an early Bronze Age city. Mentioned in the Hebrew Bible (Numbers 21:1–3, 33:40; Joshua 12:14), ancient Arad was an important fortress guarding the southern approaches to the country.

The site covers several hectares and consists of a lower and an upper city. The upper city is called the 'hill of fortresses' and was settled during the Israelite period (1200 BCE). Archaeologists have found an Israelite temple with a sanctuary and a small room that served as the Holy of Holies.

Tel Arad National Park *(adult/child 14/7NIS; 8am-5pm Sun-Thu Apr-Sep, to 4pm Oct-Mar)* is 8km west of Arad. Take any bus towards Be'er Sheva, get off at the Tel Arad junction (6NIS) and walk the final 3km to the site on Rte 80.

Muza $$

PUB

(www.muza-arad.co.il; Rte 31; mains 49NIS; noon-2am) Tucked behind the Alon petrol station, this big sports-oriented pub serves hearty pub food such as salads, pasta, grilled sandwiches and towering burgers.

Information

Arad Tourist Office *(08-995 4160; 9am-5pm Thu-Sat)* Located behind the Paz petrol station; has information on activities in the Dead Sea and surrounding area.

Getting There & Away

To get to Arad, take Egged bus 384 or 385 from Be'er Sheva (18NIS, 45 minutes) at 9.40am, 12.15pm or 3pm. From Arad, bus 384 leaves to Be'er Sheva from the central bus terminal on Yehuda St at 9.20am, noon, 1.40pm, 4.40pm and 7.40pm, and for Ein Gedi (34NIS, 1½ hours) at 10.15am, 1pm and 3.45pm.

To access the sound and light show at Masada (30-minute drive; Click here) take Rte 3199 from the back of Arad.

WORTH A TRIP

THE WINE ROUTE

In recent years the number of vineyards in the valleys and northern hills of the Negev has grown significantly. These vineyards mark the first attempts to nurture grapes in the desert since the ancient Nabataean winepresses of Shivta and Avdat. Using innovative computerised watering methods (such as drip irrigation), winegrowers have converted arid areas of dust into fertile land. Calling ahead is advised before visiting any of these wineries.

Located on the road to Tel Arad (Rte 80) the **Yatir Winery** *(08-995 9090; www.yatir.net)* has had meteoric success since its first wine was released in 2004, and is known for its sauvignon blanc and cabernet merlot. Note that the Yatir Forest, however, is better reached from Rte 60, north of the Shocket Junction, then right towards Shani.

Heading south on Rte 40, just before Sde Boker, the **Boker Valley Vineyard** *(052 682 2930; www.israeldesertlodge.com)* has an excellent wine lodge restaurant, as well as a farm store selling wines and olive oil.

The **Sde Boker Winery** *(050 757 9212; www.sde-boker.org.il/winery)* was established in 1999 by Zvi Remak from California and specialises in handcrafted, barrel red wines from Zinfandel and Carignan grapes. It's next to the Ben-Gurion Desert Home (Click here).

Continuing south on Rte 40, just before the Avdat ruins, the **Carmey Avdat Winery** *(08-653 5177; www.carmeyavdat.com)* is a family-run ecological farm that produces fine merlots with a unique desert aroma. It also offers accommodation in cabins.

Be'er Sheva

08 / POP 194,300

As you approach Be'er Sheva *(Bear Share-Vah)* from the north, the green fields merge into desert and you begin to notice that green blades and leaves are at a premium. Be'er Sheva was developed in the '60s and is still rapidly expanding. For many travellers it's just a convenient stop used for its transport connections; but it is also the fourth-largest city in Israel, the 'capital of the Negev', and home to the region's major hospital and the pioneering Ben-Gurion University, with over 20,000 students. The student population is so important here that locals joke that if Tel Aviv is a city with a university, then Be'er Sheva is a university with a city.

Today the young, educated population is starting to stay on after graduation, and high-tech research is big business here. Although most of the city hangs out in the air-conditioned malls, you should head to the Old Town for Be'er Sheva's best felafel and coffee.

History

Be'er Sheva has a rich history, receiving mention in the Bible (Judges 20:1; I Samuel 3:20; II Samuel 3:10, 17:11, 24:2), though little of that is detectable today. The one surviving ancient monument, a well on Hebron Rd, attests to the town's association with the story of Abraham (Genesis 21:25–33), in which the name Be'er Sheva is given as meaning 'the well of the oath', though it could also derive from the 'seven wells' of Isaac. In fact, until the Turks developed the town in the late 19th century, Be'er Sheva remained little more than a collection of wells used by local Bedouin.

During WWI the small town fell to Allenby's allied forces after a charge by units of the Australian Light Horse. The Egyptian army conquered Be'er Sheva after the State of Israel was declared, but in October 1948 the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) regained the town and a new era of immigration began.

470 and 446, 32.50NIS, two hours) and every 30 minutes for Dimona (bus 48, 11.80NIS, 30 minutes). Egged services for Eilat (bus 392 or 397, 55NIS, 3½ hours) depart more or less every 90 minutes and run via Mitzpe Ramon (30NIS, 1½ hours). Buses to Masada and Ein Gedi (bus 384; 42NIS, 2¼ hours, four daily Sunday to Thursday, two on Friday) pass through Arad (18NIS, 45 minutes). Metropoline also operates bus services to Tel Aviv (bus 380) and Mitzpe Ramon (bus 60) for the same fares as Egged.

Car

Budget *(✆ 08-935 0077; 1 Shazar Blvd)* **Eldan** *(✆ 08-643 0344; www.eldan.co.il; 4 Leonard Cohen St)* Order online to get the best car-rental deal.

Sherut (Shared Taxi)

Moniot Ayal *(✆ 08-623 3033)* operates sherut (shared or service taxi) services to Tel Aviv (30NIS), but there's nothing running on Saturday and you have to wait until they fill up. They operate from a booth just outside the central bus station.

Train

Northbound trains from Be'er Sheva's central **train station** *(www.rail.co.il)* start at 5.38am and run hourly until 9.38pm, stopping at Be'er Sheva Tzafon (Ben-Gurion University), Lahavim-Rahat, Lod, Tel Aviv (29NIS, 1½ hours), Haifa, Akko and terminating at Nahariyya. There are no services after 11.29am on Friday until 7pm Saturday.

Getting Around

You can easily walk from the central bus station to the Old Town and the market. Otherwise, buses 12 and 13 depart every 20 minutes for the Beit Yatziv HI Hostel.

NEGEV BEDOUIN

Think of Bedouin and the age-old images of nomadic pastoralists roaming the desert, tending flocks of sheep and dwelling in tents spring to mind. But times are changing. Fast.

Many younger Bedouin now refer to themselves as 'Negev Arabs', as the word *'bedû'* (Bedouin) is usually associated with agriculture. Nearly half of the Negev Bedouin now reside in urbanised villages and towns; some even have PhDs or medical degrees.

The truth is nobody really knows how many Bedouin live in the Middle East. Before 1948, 65,000 to 90,000 Bedouin resided in the Negev Desert. Today, there are an estimated 180,000 Bedouin in the area, many in the far-flung clusters of tents that dot the landscape east and south of Be'er Sheva. They speak a mixture of Arabic and Hebrew, and around five to 10 per cent of Bedouin men of draft age serve in the IDF (Israel Defence Forces), often as trackers, though service is not compulsory.

The city of Rahat, 20km north of Be'er Sheva, is the largest recognised Bedouin settlement and has approximately 40,000 residents. An ugly mess of cramped housing, Rahat is an isolated town crippled by poverty and crime, many of its people without job prospects. A visit is not recommended.

In 2011, Israel's cabinet approved a controversial US$335 million plan to relocate 30,000 Bedouin from unrecognised settlements to state-recognised villages in a bid to integrate them with the rest of society. Activists fear that the plan will create socioeconomic conditions like those in Rahat.

Growing numbers of Bedouin are turning towards tourism as a source of income, offering not only camel rides but also accommodation. At camps all over the Negev, visitors can stop by for the traditional three cups of Bedouin coffee and sweet tea for a handful of shekels. As they move frequently, finding a specific Bedouin tent can be difficult.

The Bedouin **Kashkhar Family** *(✆ 050 441 3212/551 3212, dm tents 45NIS)* reside just before the Avdat ruins on Rte 40 between Sde Boker and Mitzpe Ramon. Other Bedouin operate joint ventures with Israelis, such as at Kfar Hanokdim (Click here) near Arad.

Around Be'er Sheva

Sights

MUSEUM

Museum of Bedouin Culture *(✆ 08-991 3322; www.joealon.org.il; admission 25NIS; 9am-4pm Sat-Thu, to 2pm Fri)* **With the fast-paced social and technological changes of the 21st century, preservation of Bedouin culture is becoming increasingly important. The idea for this museum came from Jews and local Bedouin interested in promoting Bedouin culture and heritage.**

The collection, consisting of traditional clothes, household utensils,

hour); the IAF museum is the last stop.

Lakiya Negev Weaving *(08-651 9883; www.lakiya.org; 8am-5pm Sun-Thu, 10-4pm Sat)* **Lakiya was established in 1991 as an income-generating project for Bedouin women living in villages in the Negev. It provides these women with an opportunity to develop the tradition of spinning and weaving, and to acquire new skills in dyeing, production and business management.** ARTS CENTRE

You can visit the centre, which is in the Bedouin village of Lakiya, about 6km north of Be'er Sheva off Rte 31. Share a cup of sweet herbal tea and check out the vast range of woven rugs, cushions and bags. A tour (including Bedouin snacks) costs 25NIS and a private weaving lesson is 60NIS.

WHAT EXACTLY IS A MAKHTESH?

Usually translated as 'crater' and occasionally as 'canyon', a more accurate definition of a *makhtesh* is an 'erosion cirque' – a large, asymmetrical hole formed by erosion as the Negev made the transition from ocean to desert. Providing a peep into the Earth's crust, the *makhteshim* found in the Negev and Sinai are thought to be unique geological phenomena, because each is drained by a wadi (valley), although similar rock features have been found in Turkmenistan and Iran. Makhtesh Ramon, the largest in Israel, certainly looks like something out of a science-fiction film.

There are two other *makhteshim* in the Negev, **Makhtesh HaKatan** (Big Makhtesh) and **Makhtesh HaGadol** (Small Makhtesh). Both are south of Dimona, but neither is accessible by bus. The best option if you want to hike in the area is to hire a car in Be'er Sheva.

Makhtesh HaKatan, almost perfectly circular, can be found off the highway linking Dimona with the Dead Sea (Rte 25). The entrance to HaMakhtesh HaGadol is near the sleepy town of Yeroham (take Rte 204 south from Dimona towards Sde Boker). There is a beautiful drive right through the crater on Rte 225; look out for the coloured sands.

Sde Boker

08 / POP 1200

Israel's first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, once said, 'The Negev is the cradle of our nation; it lies in a dangerous, vulnerable region, but one of tremendous potential.' There is no better place to witness this tremendous potential than at Sde Boker, one of the best known of all kibbutzim.

The kibbutz was established in 1952 by young pioneers who planned to breed cattle in the desert; its name is Hebrew for 'Cowboy's Field'. Ben-Gurion joined this lush oasis the following year at the age of 67, to practise what he preached by cultivating the Negev. Only 14 months later he returned to the political scene as minister of defence and went on to serve a second term as prime minister, returning to kibbutz life in 1963.

Sde Boker is well known for its environmental research and education thanks largely to **Midreshet Ben-Gurion** *(www.boker.org.il)*, a satellite campus of Be'er Sheva's Ben-Gurion University of the Negev. Sde Boker has more than 20 different research and educational institutions, including the Zuckerberg Institute for Water Research, the Institute for Desert Research, the National Solar Energy Centre and an environmental high school.

GOURMET GOATS

Aside from camels and migrating birds, the Negev Highlands region has also traditionally been a home for mountain goats. Usually associated with Bedouin herders, a number of new Israeli gourmet goat farms are cropping up along the wine route.

Naot Farm *(054 421 8788; www.naotfarm.co.il)* has 150 goats and runs tours of the farm, offers accommodation in cabins (800NIS with breakfast) and sells *labneh* (thick yoghurt) and other dairy delights in its shop.

Across the highway, **Kornmehl Farm** *(08-655 5140; www.kornmehl.co.il; 10am-6pm)* has a restaurant serving cheese platters, goat's-cheese pizzas and homemade yoghurts with syrup. They don't call it the 'land of milk and honey' for nothing!

Both farms offer the chance to see goat-milking and are on Rte 40 between the Telalim and Halukim Junctions near Sde Boker.

Sights

Ben-Gurion Desert Home

HOUSE

(adult/child 12/9NIS; 8.30am-4pm Sun-Thu, to 2pm Fri, 10am-4pm Sat) When Ben-Gurion died in 1973 he asked in his will for his kibbutz quarters to remain exactly as he left them, and that's what you see when you visit the small desert home. A recently made short animation is shown near the entrance about the life of Ben-Gurion, from his birth in Poland to leadership in Israel. The tour of the modest hut where he lived begins in his living room and ends in the private library with some 5000 books. Ben-Gurion read in nine different languages (he taught himself Greek in order to read philosophy). Appropriately, the book left resting on a coffee table is entitled *Let Us Live in Peace and Friendship*.

Ben-Gurion graves

MEMORIAL

The graves of David and Paula Ben-Gurion (1892–1968), who once said she wasn't as fond of the desert as her husband, lie in a spectacular clifftop setting overlooking the stunning Wadi Zin and the Avdat plain. Sunrise or sunset, it offers awe-inspiring views of the broad ravine, and a desert flora park has been planted next to the tombs, where wild ibexes wander around.

The graves can be reached from the upper entrance of Ein Avdat National Park, which is just on the southern edge of the Midreshet Ben-Gurion campus, about 3km south of the kibbutz.

Ein Avdat National Park

PARK

(adult/child 27/14NIS; 8am-5pm Apr-Sep, to 4pm Oct-Mar) Less than 50m from Ben-Gurion's tomb, Ein Avdat National Park is a freak of nature – a pool of icy water in the hot expanse of desert, fed by waters that flow through an intricate network of channels. Dominated by a steep, winding ravine of soft white chalk and poplar trees, the pool is reached via an easy hike through incredible scenery.

There are two entrances to the national park – the southern and northern. The main ticket office is at the northern entrance, next to the Ben-Gurion graves and the beautiful Wilderness of Zin nature trail. The trail leads down a 3km zigzag road, then along the river to the upper entrance, which is 5km south along Rte 40.

Hikers can choose between two trails – a long one-way route (two to three hours) or a short circular route (about one hour round trip).

The longer trail starts from the car park and follows a path that leads off beyond into the rocky creek. About 40 minutes later you will see a large cave appear up on your right. Ibexes and gazelles can often be seen along here, too. Simply follow the trickle of water and after another five minutes you will arrive at the freshwater spring.

This is a dead end, so return the way you came and on your left look out for some steps cut into the rock leading up the cliff to reach the top of the ravine. Climb the steps to the paved ledge, where there's a great observation point. The best views are from the steps, rather than at the very top, so take a good look around before the end of the climb.

Carry on walking and after another few minutes you will reach the top of a waterfall, which usually flows more in winter due to seasonal rainfall.

Note that as this is a one-way hike (you are not allowed to go *down* the steps), to return to the lower car park you'll need to hitch or wait for a bus (one every 1½ hours) back to Sde Boker. Check the bus schedule before heading off to help time your hike.

A less ambitious option is to walk from the lower entrance to the Ein Ma'arif pools at the foot of the waterfall, return along the same path and then drive to the upper parking lot where you can admire the view from the observation point and pretend you did the steep climb up the steps.

Ein Akev

SPRING

Another popular trail is to Ein Akev, a freshwater spring on the other side of Wadi Zin. Starting from the car park of Midreshet Ben-Gurion, follow the winding path down to the Wadi Zin valley floor. Follow the blue signs across the valley and you will start ascending a gentle slope until you reach the Akev spring, which has a pool of clear water all year. From the spring, you can go back the way you came or take the higher green-signed path back to the car park, walking above dry waterfalls. The trail is a 12km loop back to the start and takes around six hours.

Activities

Geofun Desert Cycling

CYCLING

(08-655 3350; www.geofun.co.il) **Situated in the small Midreshet Ben-**

From Be'er Sheva, Metropoline bus 60 (14.20NIS, 55 minutes) runs every 30 minutes. Egged bus 392 (24.50NIS, one hour) leaves Be'er Sheva at 8.15am, 9.15am, noon and 3.45pm. The bus makes three separate stops for Sde Boker – the main entrance of the kibbutz, then at the turn-off for the Ben-Gurion Desert Home and, finally, at the turn-off for the university campus, the Ben-Gurion graves and Ein Avdat. Warn the driver in advance where you want to get off.

A SPICE ODYSSEY

Often overlooked in school history lessons, the Nabataeans were ancient Arabs known to have lived in the Negev from the 4th century BCE. They were a nomadic people until Rome became aware of the profitability of the spice route and muscled in on their trade. After the Roman conquest, the Nabataeans took on more 'European' attributes and eventually adopted Christianity. They spoke a form of Aramaic, the lingua franca of the region some 2000 years ago. Despite the hostile desert environment, the Nabataeans developed sophisticated irrigation methods, and their kings lavishly wasted water in front of guests to show off.

At one point, the spice and incense route stretched from India to Rome, passing through Saudi Arabia, Ethiopia, Sudan, Petra and Judea. As a result, the Negev cities of Avdat, Mamshit and Shivta became prosperous, and the desert around them flourished. The ruins of these towns were declared Unesco World Heritage sites in 2005.

Avdat

A beautifully preserved site, this ancient city upon a hill dominates the surrounding desert skyline. With its impressive ruins, arches and pillars and its incredible vistas, **Avdat National Park** *(adult/child 27/14NIS; 8am-5pm Apr-Sep, to 4pm Oct-Mar)* is well worth the steep climb. Parts of the film *Jesus Christ Superstar* were shot here.

Named after the Nabataean monarch Obada, Avdat was built in the 3rd century BCE as a caravan stop on the road from Petra to the Mediterranean. Prosperous throughout the Byzantine period, the city was deserted following an earthquake in 630 CE and the Muslim takeover of the Negev six years later.

The ruins include a Roman bathhouse, catacombs, several 4th-century churches, a pottery workshop and a Byzantine winepress.

On Rte 40, Avdat lies 10km south of Sde Boker and 23km north of Mitzpe Ramon. Bus 60 passes by in each direction about every hour.

Shivta (Subeita)

The most isolated of the Nabataean towns, **Shivta** *(admission free; 8am-5pm Apr-Sep, to 4pm Oct-Mar)* was founded during the early Roman period (1st century BCE). Most of the findings are from when it was an important Byzantine town (4th to 7th centuries CE) on the caravan route between Egypt and Anatolia.

Shivta's ruins include Byzantine churches, houses and tiled streets and an impressive irrigation system.

Shivta is 58km southwest of Be'er Sheva. From Rte 40 continue from Telalim Junction on Rte 211 for about 15km. At the junction near the petrol station, drive 9km south.

Mamshit

Much easier to reach than Shivta, **Mamshit National Park** *(08-655 6478; adult/child 21/9NIS; 8am-5pm Apr-Sep, to 4pm Oct-Mar)* is the ancient city also known as Memphis or Kurnub. It is the smallest but best-preserved Nabataean city in the Negev.

The Nabataeans built their city in Wadi Mamshit in the 1st century CE; it was later used by the Romans. The excavations include ancient reservoirs, watchtowers, churches and Roman and Byzantine cemeteries. One highlight is the large mosaic floor at the courtyard of the Church of St Nilus.

Mamshit is on Rte 25, about 8km from Dimona. Any of the buses heading to Eilat via Dimona will drop you at the turn-off for the site.

The **Nabataean Khan** *(dm tents 50NIS, tukuls for 5 people 350NIS, bungalows for 5 people 450NIS)* is a camping ground at the foot of the site, featuring a *tukul* (Ethiopian-style tepee). The tents have heaters and there are shower cubicles on site.

Mitzpe Ramon

08 / POP 5500

Mitzpe Ramon feels like something out of a sci-fi movie. The lunar landscape here resembles Tatooine (the fictional desert planet in *Star Wars*) and the wide, open spaces, far from city lights, are perfect for a spot of stargazing. Mitzpe is Hebrew for 'lookout'; accordingly, this small desert town is perched above the dramatic Makhtesh Ramon, Israel's very own Grand Canyon. All along this spectacular watchtower you'll find far-ranging views and an extensive network of hiking routes. The Makhtesh Ramon Nature Reserve, which encompasses the crater and the Negev Mountains, is the largest protected area in Israel.

Despite being in the heart of the desert, Mitzpe Ramon is also one of the coldest places in Israel, especially at night, due to its elevation (900m above sea level). Snow falls here more often than in Jerusalem.

Founded as a workers camp in 1951, Mitzpe remained an isolated community for many years. When Rte 90 was opened in the late '60s, traffic to Eilat was able to bypass the town, halting its development.

But today many travellers prefer to take the scenic route south, allowing time to soak up the sights here. The *makhtesh* is now a magnet for an eclectic mix of city-slicking artists, adventurous backpackers and eco-tourists. However, the recent opening of the five-star Beresheet Hotel

on the crater's edge is likely to have a galactic impact on this remote town.

Sights

Makhtesh Ramon

LANDMARK, LOOKOUT

Although Israel is a little country, the *makhtesh* is one place where it feels vast. Here the desert landscape opens up and you would be forgiven for thinking you were in Arizona. The *makhtesh* is 300m deep, 8km wide and 40km long and features multicoloured sandstone, volcanic rock and fossils.

Unless you suffer from vertigo, the **lookout** Offline map Google map, which juts out over the edge of the crater, is a must. Stop for a while and look out over millions of years of geological evolution and unbelievable rock formations. Just don't look down from the platform if you're faint-hearted as there's nothing between your feet and the bottom of the crater. The lookout is about 300m south of the visitors centre along the *makhtesh* promenade.

A few nature trails have been marked out in the *makhtesh* and detailed hiking maps are available from the SPNI Field School.

Nahal Gewanim-Ein Sharonim Trail The Nahal Gewanim-Ein Sharonim trail is one of the most popular hikes or 'moonwalks' near Mitzpe. The variety of colours of rock (black, red, yellow and orange) seen along the way is astounding. In winter the stream running from Ein Sharonim can be hundreds of metres long, but it dries up in summer.

The hike takes around 2½ to three hours, plus a 20-minute drive there and back from the town on Rte 40. If you have a car, turn off where the sign says 'Be'erot Camping' and drive up the dirt track for 10 minutes. You start the trail in the middle of the *makhtesh* at the Be'erot camping ground.

Otherwise you can reach the trail by taking the southbound bus (to Eilat) from the petrol station in Mitzpe Ramon and telling the driver you want to get off at the turning for the Be'erot camping ground. Walk up the 4WD track from the road for about 30 minutes, then take the right fork after the electricity pylon.

At the top of the slope follow the green-on-white trail markers on a narrow path that takes you along the ridge. After 15 minutes the path splits into high and low paths. Scramble up the rock face to the top of the ridge for a commanding view of the rock formations and maze of wadis winding through them.

The **Sharonim Stronghold**, a station on the Nabataean Incense Route, sits on top of the hill, though not much remains of this ancient site except a few low-cut walls. If you took the high path, climb down to join the low path, which leads to a wadi (Nahal Gewanim).

Follow the wadi and after 25 minutes it narrows considerably, with caves on both sides of the canyon. Follow the blue-on-white trail markers for 20 minutes until you come to a couple of water holes. From here, follow the trail left until you reach the 4WD track and the electricity pylon where you started.

Other hikes, also starting from Be'erot camping ground, include a trek to **Nahal Ardon**, which is a mostly flat hike that takes 3½ hours to complete and ends with great views of the Ardon Valley, or if you have the stamina you could take the six-hour trek to **Mt Ardon** on the northeastern edge to give a different view of the crater.

Scenic Pass

The scenic pass is part of the Israel National Trail, a series of hikes that runs the length of the country. It is a leisurely and very scenic two-hour hike that takes you down into Makhtesh Ramon to the Carpenter's Workshop and on to the main road. From the youth hostel, follow the path along the edge of the crater until you see the sign pointing down. Follow the green trail markings and you'll eventually come to the Carpenter's Workshop. Continue to reach the main road, where you can either hitch back to town or flag down one of the infrequent buses.

Carpenter's Workshop

Shortly after the road from Mitzpe Ramon zigzags down into the crater, an orange signpost points to this site of geological interest, 500m to the right. The Carpenter's Workshop is a unique rock formation that has been shaped by pressure and is said to resemble wood.

Follow the 4WD track from the road that ends with a car park. From

the dirt track and drive for another 3km.

iBike $$

HOTEL

Offline map Google map

(✆ 08-653 9393, 052 436 7878; www.ibike.co.il; 4 Har Ardon St; s/d 320/410NIS; ✻ᯤ) The iBike comprises seven spacious rooms with private bathrooms and a large, comfortable communal lounge area. Located in the industrial zone, it has the feel of a dive club or ski club and is a great place to mix with other travellers. Guests can use the spa with a sauna and jacuzzi, as well as get expert advice and tours for all levels of cyclists from helpful hosts Aviva and Menachem. Next door, it also has a cafe serving breakfasts, salads, sandwiches and pasta dishes.

TOP CHOICE Green Backpackers $

HOSTEL

(✆ 08-653 2319; www.thegreenbackpackers.com; 10 Nahal Sirpad St; dm 75NIS, d without bathroom 255NIS; ✻@ᯤ) Opened in 2011, this cute, homely hostel with soft carpets and clean rooms meets all the budget backpacker's needs. There is a library of DVDs, secondhand books, travellers' message board and shared recipes in the communal kitchen. It also offers laundry services, hiking gear and free wi-fi. Idiosyncratic touches include a framed painting of Kramer from *Seinfeld* in the hallway and a toilet decorated with old cassette tapes. Located in a quiet cul-de-sac at the end of Nahal Zia St, the hostel is a little hard to find but owner Lee will be happy to direct you.

Silent Arrow $

CAMPGROUND

(Hetz BaSheket; ✆ 052 661 1561; www.hetzbashekt.com; Bedouin tent beds/dome tents per person 80/120NIS) As the name suggests, this is indeed a place for peace and desert tranquillity. The camp is 700m from town, down a dirt track, and the only sound you will hear is that of your own snoring. Guests can choose from a mattress in the communal Bedouin-style tent or a private dome tent. Remember to bring your own sleeping bag. Free coffee and tea are provided in the kitchen and lounge tent area, but breakfast is not provided. It also takes volunteers (one week minimum).

Be'erot Camping $

CAMPGROUND

(✆ 08-658 6713; www.beerot.com; Bedouin tents per person 50NIS, private r for 6 people with shower 500NIS) This remote Bedouin-run camp is the only place to sleep in the *makhtesh*. It is also the starting point for most of the hikes, so it is popular with tour groups and can be busy during the day. Sleeping options include traditional Bedouin tents, as well as new private rooms with clean bathrooms and a modern shower block. It's 12km south of Mitzpe Ramon on the highway to Eilat, and then 5km down a bumpy access road.

Alpaca Farm B&B $$

B&B

(✆ 08-658 8047, 052 897 7010/11; www.alpaca.co.il; studios per person 100NIS, d 500NIS; ✻) Where else in Israel can you wake up to the sound of birds singing as fluffy llamas and horses quietly munch on their breakfast below? If you love animals, Alpaca Farm is special place to stay. The attractive hillside cabins are decked out with wooden floors, cable TV, kitchenette and a great balcony for enjoying the desert views. There is also a separate studio, where you need your own sleeping bag. It provides electric heaters, a fridge and very clean shower rooms. Just don't leave too much food lying around; as we found out, the animals might want to 'share' it.

Adama $$

HOSTEL

(✆ 08-659 5190; Har Boker St; www.adama.org.il; campsites & dm 80NIS, tepees 175NIS, s/d 275/395NIS, r for 4 people 595NIS) A kind of spiritual and dance retreat set in a large industrial hangar, Adama may not be everyone's cup of herbal tea. But if you dig dreadlocks and have always had a secret love of all things psychedelic, then this could be for you. You can crash on a mattress in one of the airy studios, or for a bit of privacy crawl into one of the tepee-like structures. Those with tents can pitch them in the garden. Guests are welcome to participate in dance and meditation activities.

Chez Eugene $$$

BOUTIQUE HOTEL

Offline map Google map

(✆ 08-653 9595; www.mitzperamonhotel.co.il; 8 Har Ardon St; ste from 800NIS; ✻ᯤ) This new boutique hotel represents just how far Mitzpe has

come in recent years. Each room here is stylishly designed with contemporary art, funky furniture and flat-screen TVs, and all have walk-in showers. Eugene offers a different level of luxury and cuisine, but is pricier than other sleeping options in the industrial zone.

Desert Home $$

B&B

(Bait BaMidbar; 052 322 9496; www.baitbamidbar.com; 70 Ein Shaviv; d 550NIS, Fri & Sat 600NIS;) On the edge of a quiet residential neighbourhood, this is for travellers who enjoy their creature comforts. The five units are decorated in a minimalist style with bleached-wood floors, locally made furniture, art and photography. There is an on-site treatment room for massage and alternative therapy.

Beresheet $$$

LUXURY HOTEL, RESORT

Offline map Google map

(08-638 7799; www.isrotelexclusivecollection.com/beresheet; 1 Beresheet Rd; ste from US$375;) More of a small town than a hotel, recently opened Beresheet (which means 'Genesis') is unlike anything else in Mitzpe. The 111 ultraluxurious rooms (many with their own pools) are supposed to complement the natural surroundings. Tightly guarded by security staff on golf buggies, it has a lavish gourmet restaurant, piano bar and the ultimate infinity pool overlooking the crater.

Desert Shade $

LODGE

Offline map Google map

(08-658 6229; www.desert-nomads.com; dm/s/d 70/100/200NIS;) Directly opposite the Desert Sculpture Park, Desert Shade is an ecotourism centre running occasional seminars on peace and ecology. It has incredible views of the *makhtesh* and offers accommodation in Bedouin tents or mud huts, where empty wine bottles are used as windows. It also has wi-fi connectivity in the cushioned communal area.

HI – Mitzpe Ramon Youth Hostel $

HOSTEL

Offline map Google map

(08-658 8443; mitzpe@iyha.org.il; dm/s/d 152/320/450NIS;) A short downhill walk from the visitors centre, this large hostel is right on

Mitzpe Ramon lies 23km south of Avdat and 136km north of Eilat. Metropoline bus 60 shuttles hourly to and from Be'er Sheva (16.50NIS, 1½ hours) from 6am to 9.30pm via Sde Boker and Ein Avdat. From Sunday to Thursday Egged buses 392 or 397 travel to Eilat (44NIS, three hours) at 9.53am, 10.53am, 1.38pm and 5.23pm. The only bus to Eilat on Friday is at 9.38am. Catch the bus to Eilat from the petrol station.

The Arava

08 / POP 5200

The Arava is a beautiful, sparsely populated desert that runs from the Dead Sea to the Red Sea, and is part of the Great Rift Valley (which runs north to south for some 5000km from northern Syria to central Mozambique). Wherever you are in the southern Arava, the red mountains of Jordan can be seen. The region is home to Israel's most innovative environmental projects.

Sights

Timna Park HISTORIC SITE

(www.timna-park.co.il; adult/child 44/39NIS; 8am-4pm Sat-Thu, to 1pm Fri & Sun) **About 25km north of Eilat, Timna Park is the site of one of the world's earliest copper mines. The park is dotted with ancient mine shafts, some dug by Egyptians in the 5th century BCE, but it also includes a wonderland of geological phenomena. The most intriguing are the Natural Arch, Solomon's Pillars (two huge columns of granite formed by rainwater some 540 million years ago) and the Mushroom, an eroded monolith in the shape of, you guessed it, a mushroom. Chariots Corner has ancient, childlike wall inscriptions dating from the second millennium BCE.**

You could easily spend a whole day hiking here, but the park is so spread out that a hire car is needed. Information about walks is available at the entrance, where visitors can watch a film. There is also a camping area at the lake, where you can pitch your tent for 40NIS per person.

Buses between Eilat and Jerusalem pass the park turn-off, 2.5km from the park entrance.

Yotvata Hai-Bar Nature Reserve WILDLIFE RESERVE

(www.parks.org.il; adult/child 43/22NIS; 8.30am-5pm Sun-Thu, to 3.30pm Fri & Sat) **Located 35km north of Eilat, Yotvata Hai-Bar was created to establish breeding groups of wild animals that are mentioned in the Bible, as well as other threatened species.**

The reserve has three parts: a 1.2-hectare penned-in area where you can observe the animals (mainly African asses, addax, ostriches and oryxes); the predator centre, where reptiles, small desert animals and large predators such as wolves and leopards are on display; and the desert Night Life exhibition hall, where night and day are reversed so daytime visitors can observe nocturnal animals such as pygmy gerbils while they're active.

A private car is needed to navigate the reserve's gravel roads and a visit takes about an hour. It's recommended to visit at feeding time; between 11am and 1pm. Visitors can pitch tents near the entrance for 50NIS a night and use the bathrooms.

The reserve is on Rte 90 between Kibbutz Yotvata and Kibbutz Samar.

Kibbutz Lotan KIBBUTZ

(www.kibbutzlotan.com; Rte 90) Synonymous with an ecological vision known in Hebrew as *tikkun olam* (repairing the world), Lotan has operated for over 25 years. The kibbutz, one of only two kibbutzim in Israel affiliated with the Jewish Reform Movement, has three core centres: Bird Reserve, Creative Ecology (Eco-Kef in Hebrew) and Holistic Desert Health. The Bird Reserve is set in the sandy plain very near the Jordanian border and is dotted with camouflaged viewpoints. Lotan runs regular workshops in alternative building methods, as well as half-day and full-day tours that show visitors how to put environmental theory into practice. The Holistic Desert Health Centre offers sessions in ashtanga yoga, massage, reiki, reflexology and Watsu (water shiatsu). A 50-minute session of Watsu is 280NIS.

(www.neot-semadar.com; Shizzafon Junction; mains 38-50NIS; 7am-9pm Sun-Thu, to 4pm Fri, 6-9pm Sat;) Definitely worth the drive up here, this cute roadside inn has a beautiful rear garden, worthy of its name (*neot* means 'oasis'). Try the delicious goat's cheese lasagne, *shakshuka*, nectarine juice or plum ice cream. If you eat here you get a 5% discount off the organic olive oil, jams, teas and ice cream produced by Kibbutz Neot Semadar, a young, very alternative community nearby.

Yotvata Restaurant $$

CAFETERIA

(Kibbutz Yotvata, Rte 90; dishes from 32NIS; 24hr, closed Fri night) This dairy restaurant and supermarket, run by one of the wealthiest kibbutzim in Israel (despite its remote desert location, Yotvata is famous around the country for its top-quality milk products), is permanently filled with busloads of tourists. It's noisy and overcrowded, but serves the kibbutz's own cheese, chocolate and ice cream.

Eilat

08 / POP 47,500

A thin wedge between Jordan and Egypt at the southern tip of Israel, Eilat makes a lot of noise for its size. A raunchy resort town set around a lagoon lined with glitzy hotels, this is where Israelis come to have fun.

Thanks to an average winter temperature of 21°C, the place is heaving all year, but come summer the temperature rises to over 40°C, making it one of the hottest places in the country. Luckily, the Red Sea is the ideal antidote and will help cool you off throughout the year.

For many visitors Eilat's real appeal is its proximity to desert mountains and canyons. Eilat has a small coral reef, but serious divers searching for the Red Sea's magical underwater world should head onward to Sinai.

History

Inhabited since antiquity, Eilat is first mentioned in the Book of Exodus, after the Israelites' crossing of the Red Sea. In ancient times on the border of the states of Edom and Midian, it was an important stopping point on the copper and incense trade routes, and in the Roman era a road was built from Eilat to Petra. Trade declined over the centuries, and eventually the Ottomans built a port across the bay in Aqaba.

Eilat remained little more than a small British police station until the modern city was founded in 1951. Rapidly developed for tourism, Eilat is now a popular and, you could say, overcrowded resort town. If the planned new airport in Timna goes ahead, the removal of the present airport could open up acres of city-centre land for development and, no doubt, more hotels.

Reserve and the Yotvata visitors centre. There are no direct buses from Eilat to Cairo. Bus 15 goes from the central bus station to the Taba border crossing (via Coral Beach).

Getting Around

The town centre is walkable, but you'll need a bus or taxi for locations along the Taba road. The hourly Egged bus 15 connects the central bus station with the Egyptian border at Taba (7.50NIS) from 8am to 9pm Sunday to Thursday, to 3pm Friday and 9am to 7pm Saturday. To reach the Rabin border crossing into Jordan, you'll have to get a taxi (30NIS).

Car

You can rent a car by calling any of the following, all located in the Shalom Centre: **Eldan** *(✆ 08-637 4027; www.eldan.co.il)* Check online for deals.

Hertz *(✆ 1-700 507 555)* **Sixt** *(✆ 08-6373511)*

Taxi

Eilat's taxis can be an inexpensive and comfortable way to get around, especially when there are two or more of you. Although distances are short, much of the town is on a hill and, worn out by the heat, you could well decide to take a smart Mercedes ride rather than walk. A taxi from the town centre to Taba is around 38NIS.

SECURITY ALERT

In August 2011 four squads of terrorists entered Israel from Sinai along a 12km stretch of border-hugging Rte 12, about 10km northwest of Eilat, killing eight Israelis, most of them civilians. At the time of research, areas right along the Egyptian border, including Rte 12, were closed to non-military traffic. Before setting out on a hike (eg to Ein Netafim), consult the SPNI Field School tour guides (Click here) about the security situation.

Around Eilat

Eilat is surrounded by jagged, red-rock mountains created by the tectonic movements of the Great Rift Valley (Syrian– African Rift). The desert environment, blazing with glorious colours (especially at sunrise and sunset), is home to a huge variety of wildlife, flora and fauna.

There are also many archaeological sites in the area which show that ancient peoples managed not only to live in these harsh surroundings but also to thrive – among other things, they helped usher humanity out of the Stone Age and into the Bronze Age by smelting copper. Hikers will want to head for the Eilat Mountains, but be sure to pick up a copy of the 1:50,000 SPNI *Eilat Mountains* topographical hiking map (Click here) at the SPNI Field School in Eilat. Any of the following places are accessible on a 40NIS to 60NIS taxi ride from Eilat.

About 20km north of Eilat on the Arava Rd (Rte 90) hikers can follow the Israel National Trail to the spectacular **Shehoret Canyon**, which takes around three to four hours to hike. Near the mouth of Shehoret (or 'Black') Canyon lie the impressive **Amram Pillars**, also along the Israel National Trail, where there's an official camping ground (but no water).

An excellent six-to seven-hour hike will take you through the spectacular **Nakhal Gishron** (part of the Israel National Trail) from Har Yoash to the Egyptian border. Get an early start and carry at least 3L of water per person.

Further north, the 600m-long **Red Canyon** can be reached off the highway to Ovda (Rte 12). The canyon, which is just 1m to 3m wide, and 10m to 20m deep, is accessible on foot by way of a 1.5km walking track from the car park. It makes a great 1½-hour hike and involves some climbing.

If you want to travel like Lawrence of Arabia, then **Camel Ranch** Offline map Google map *(✆ 08-637 0022; www.camel-ranch.co.il; Nakhal Shlomo)* organises 90-minute (135NIS per person) camel treks from its base. Treks include Bedouin snacks such as *labneh* and pita bread. The ranch is less than 2km inland down Wadi Shlomo from the Eilat–Taba road.

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The Gaza Strip

Includes »
Gaza City
Elsewhere in the Gaza Strip

Why Go?

Gaza is not on the ‘to-do’ list for most travellers – for good reason. Since Hamas took control of the territory in June 2007 after a showdown with rival Fatah, Gaza has been blockaded by land, sea and sky by Israel (Gaza’s land border with Egypt was sealed by the Mubarak regime until its fall in 2011). Getting out of Gaza can be even harder, and travellers can be detained on both sides of the border for questioning.

So why go to Gaza at all? Well, in times of safety and peace, a visit to Gaza could be one you won’t quickly forget. Beyond the poverty and rubble, you might find traces of an illustrious Mediterranean trading history spanning three millennia.

Today’s Gaza is a paradox of extreme poverty and privilege. While the vast majority of Gazans rely on international aid, you’ll also see spacious villas, the odd Mercedes and a few luxury hotels. Yet, at just 45km long and 10km wide, Gaza is one of the most densely populated areas in the world.

When to Go

Winters in Gaza are temperate and mild, with only occasional rain. If you’re there at the end of July, you can see thousands of children fly colourful kites for the Gaza Kite Festival. The height of the heatwave is through August and September, when many Gazans head to the beach.

Gaza in Numbers

» 1.65 million – Total population 1.1 million – Estimated refugees 360 sq km – Total area 17 years – Average age 45% – Unemployed

Gaza at a Glance

» 1516–1917: Ottoman Empire 1917–48: British Mandate 1948–67: Egyptian occupation 1967–2005: Israeli occupation 2006–present: Hamas control

History

COMMERCE AND CONQUERORS

Settlement in Gaza is thought to date back to the Bronze Age, when it was used by the ancient Egyptians as a centre of trade. As far back into antiquity as 1500 BCE, an inscription on the Egyptian Temple of Amun at Karnak noted that Gaza was 'flourishing'. By the time Alexander the Great arrived in 332 BCE, the land had already passed through the hands of the Philistines, the Israelites (under King David and Solomon), the Assyrians and the Persians. In 63 BCE Gaza became part of the Roman province of Judea (later named Syria Palaestina) and was governed by a diverse 500-man senate. In the late 4th century, the Bishop Porphyrius forced Gazans to convert to Christianity and burned down the pagan Temple of Marna to replace it with a church.

Islam arrived in 635 CE, turning churches into mosques, a process that was briefly reversed in 1100 CE by the Crusaders, who built a cathedral that now forms part of the Great Mosque.

During the 14th century, Mamluk rule came to Gaza but the population dwindled due to a deadly plague in the 1340s. In 1516 Ottoman Empire rule began, lasting until the British arrived in 1917.

RECENT EVENTS

During WWI, the British air force under General Edmund Allenby pounded Gaza while taking Palestine from the Turks, reducing much of the city to rubble. Then, in 1927, a huge earthquake finished off much of what was left standing after the war.

Gaza was under British Mandate administration until 1948 when, with the creation of the State of Israel, Palestinian refugees flooded into the area, swelling its population from 35,000 to 170,000 in a matter of months. Egypt immediately responded to the declaration of Israel's independence in 1948 and occupied Gaza. During Egyptian occupation housing projects were expanded but after President Nasser closed the Straits of Tiran in 1967, the Six Day War began and Israel took control of Gaza.

Israeli settlers arrived in the 1970s and growing tensions ignited Palestinian activism and riots. The radical Islamic organisation Hamas was formed in 1987 and the First Intifada began with the throwing of stones and, eventually, hand grenades. A brief period of calm followed the Oslo Peace Accords and, in 1994, the Palestinian Authority (PA) assumed administrative control of Gaza. But talks to transfer permanent control to the PA failed and a Second Intifada began in September 2000, causing a series of Hamas suicide bombings and IAF strikes.

Under international pressure and in a bid to improve Israel's home security, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon ordered Israel's disengagement from Gaza and removed all of the 21 Jewish settlements with their 8000 inhabitants in August 2005. Afterwards, a power struggle within Palestinian ranks began, culminating in the shocking victory of Hamas in

the January 2006 PA elections and the withdrawal of much international aid.

In June 2006, Israel Defence Forces (IDF) soldier Gilad Shalit was kidnapped at the Gaza–Israel border. Several days afterwards, Israel launched 'Operation Summer Rains', a series of attacks that killed some 280 Palestinian militants and over 100 Palestinian civilians. In 2007 violent clashes broke out within Palestinian ranks as Hamas took control from Fatah with targeted assassinations and civilian casualties.

Meanwhile, from 2005 to 2008, thousands of Kassam and Grad rockets and mortars were fired on southern Israel from within Gaza, culminating in 87 rockets in just 24 hours on 24 December 2008. In response, Israeli forces launched 'Operation Cast Lead' by air and then by land. The Gaza War resulted in the deaths of 10 Israeli soldiers and three Israeli civilians; in Gaza there were approximately 1400 dead and thousands were made homeless. Many NGOs declared a humanitarian crisis and Israel declared a ceasefire after three weeks of fighting. Rocket attacks from Gaza on southern Israeli cities and towns have continued sporadically since then.

There was further trouble on 31 May 2010, when a flotilla of six ships (three carrying cargo and three filled with activists), heading from Turkey to Gaza, intentionally broke the naval blockade. The flotilla was intercepted by Israeli Navy commandos and, in the course of a violent struggle aboard the Turkish ship *Mavi Marmara,* nine activists were killed, contributing to a serious deterioration in the relations between Israel and Turkey.

In October 2011, after five years and four months in captivity, Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit was released by Hamas in return for 1,027 Palestinian and Arab prisoners, many of whom were convicted terrorists. The deal gave the Hamas regime, which many Gazans viewed as corrupt, a brief boost. Yet, as the Arab Spring swept through the Middle East, Gaza remained an area of mass unemployment and poverty. In early 2012, Fatah and Hamas agreed to form a unity government, though it is unclear what this means for Gaza's future.

Getting There & Away

At the time of writing, access to the Gaza Strip was extremely limited for foreigners due to security reasons. The Erez Crossing is the only potential way for foreigners to enter Gaza from Israel. However, entry is restricted to residents of Gaza, Egyptian nationals and international aid workers (even journalists are restricted, and gates may be shut completely without warning).

In May 2011, following the Arab Spring, the Rafah border with Egypt was reopened, providing a way for Palestinians to travel in and out of Gaza. Under the new Egyptian travel guidelines, Palestinian women, children and men over 40 are no longer required to obtain a visa to enter Egypt. This border is infamous for its arms-smuggling tunnels into Gaza and can also be closed at any time.

Gaza's Yasser Arafat International Airport, which opened in 1998, was closed by the IAF in 2001 during the Second Intifada.

Gaza's single railway line, which used to connect with the Israeli railways, has been out of service since the early 1970s. Train services from Gaza to Cairo, on a line built by the British during WWI, were suspended in 1967.

Gaza City

08 / POP 450,000

The exact meaning of the name Gaza has been obscured through time. Some scholars say that it derived from the old Hebrew word for 'stronghold', the ancient Egyptians called it Ghazzat ('the prized city') and Arabs called it 'the treasure'. One of the oldest functioning cities in the world, Gaza has always been considered a treasure for invaders and emperors.

Gaza City is based around the long Omar al-Mukhtar St, which runs north to south from the sea to the main Salah ad-Din St. At the southern end of Omar al-Mukhtar, the town's main focus is Palestine Sq. At the opposite end, the Rimal (Sands) area of town has the swishest houses, the city's beaches and some hotels. Directly to the east of Rimal is the Beach Refugee Camp, also called the Al-Shati Camp.

TRAVEL WARNING

Following Hamas' armed takeover in 2007, Gaza has remained an unstable place and a

Top of section

Hummus & Olives: Regional Food

In the beginning there was food, and lots of it. Yes, a quick flick through the Torah, New Testament or Quran will tell you that food has always played a significant role in the Middle East. The Scriptures are stuffed with banquets and feasts, and to this day meals mean far more than scheduled daily breaks from work or play. Food is identity, family and tradition. Here, food is home.

A relatively small area of land, Israel and the Palestinian Territories encompass a veritable universe of cuisine. Within Israel, you can generally divide home cooking into two camps: Ashkenazi (Jews of Eastern European heritage) and Sephardi/Mizrahi (Jews of Iberian, Balkan, North African or Middle Eastern origin). But like its people and music, Israeli food is increasingly becoming a fusion of cultures. The myriad of influences include Iraqi, Moroccan, Polish, Hungarian, Russian, French, Yemenite and many more.

The dish that unites both Jews and Arabs alike is undoubtedly hummus. Served warm with fresh pita bread, it can be eaten with fuul (fava bean paste), tahina (sesame seed paste) or the classic fried felafel. But there's much more beyond the chickpea…

Heavenly Hummus

» Ali Caravan, Jaffa (Click here)
» Hummus Said, Akko (Click here)
» Abu Shukhri, Abu Ghosh (Click here)
» Abu Shukri, Jerusalem (Click here)
» Nadima, Wadi Nisnas (Click here)

A VEGETARIAN BONANZA

There are few places in the world so satisfying to travel in for vegetarians as Israel and the Palestinian Territories.

Local fast food, in particular, is a vegetarian's delight, while salads are frequently served in supersized bowls with bread. In Middle Eastern–style fish or meat restaurants, the tableful of mezze-style plates you'll receive are likely to include beetroot, aubergine in tomato sauce, hummus and olives. Even in top-end, meat-heavy restaurants, you're sure to find a good vegetarian selection. In most major cities there are a growing number of health restaurants, such as the chain Fresh Kitchen, that offer a wide choice of veggie sandwiches, pastas and casseroles, and many dairy kosher cafes have strictly nonmeat menus.

Going veggie is usually more cost-effective, too. Fast food such as hummus, felafel, *sabich* and *bourekas* are all cheap, and sometimes just as filling as a meat option.

This book uses the icon to let you know that a restaurant is exclusively vegetarian, while if a restaurant is also vegan this will be indicated in the text.

Olives are found all over the region and complement dishes such as *labneh (labaneh)*, a yoghurt-type cheese that's smothered in olive oil and sprinkled with *zaatar* (a blend of spices that includes hyssop, sumac and sesame). Seasonal fruits such as grapes, apricots, peaches, oranges, lemons, plums, pears, watermelons, strawberries, pomegranates and dates are all grown locally.

SPICY SAUCES

If asked if you would like any *hareef* (hot sauce such as Yemenite schug) or *amba* (Iraqi-style mango chutney) with your felafel, *sabich* or hummus, think carefully. These spicy sauces often leave more than a slight tang on the tongue.

For a taste of Iraq, try *kuba* (delicious dough balls stuffed with meat) or *sabich* (grilled aubergine, boiled potato and egg in a pita). The Yemenite *jachnun* is an oddly addictive, highly calorific, rolled length of dough served with a hard-boiled egg, strained tomatoes and schug relish (a spicy sauce made from red or green peppers). *Shakshuka* is a spicy Moroccan egg and tomato stew, generally served at breakfast. *Bourekas* (stuffed cheese pastries made with flaky dough) and shwarma (sliced grilled meat from a spit) are thought to have come from Turkey. Immigrants from Eastern Europe brought blintzes (crêpes), schnitzel, bagels and a heavy, slow-cooked stew, traditionally eaten at midday on Shabbat, called *cholent* or *chunt*.

Israelis, Palestinians, Bedouins and Druze all love a good barbecue and on sunny weekends you're likely to see families gathering in parks to chargrill some red meat, served, of course, with bread and hummus.

When to Eat

The real question in this part of the world is, 'when not to eat?' At any time of the day or night (especially in Tel Aviv and its surrounding

suburbs), Israelis can be seen eating out. Although, in general, most Israelis eat their main meal at lunchtime, city-dwellers think nothing of going out to grab a heavy hamburger, felafel or shwarma at 10pm or later. Weekend breakfasts are long, lavish and leisurely, consisting of eggs, salads, fresh juice, bread, cheeses, olives and coffee. Thursday night is the busiest night out for drinking, while Friday nights are frequently reserved for family dinners, with younger generations heading off to bars and nightclubs after having their fill of mum's cooking.

In Arab or Palestinian towns you'll find many businesses shut up shop at midday – even in cosmopolitan Ramallah and Bethlehem – and their proprietors head home for a long family lunch. It may sound strange to Westerners, but most Arabs swear that the best time to eat hummus is early in the morning, served fresh from the pot.

Habits & Customs

Arabs, Bedouin and Druze often cook their breads in a *taboun* (clay oven), which in Israel is also used for pizzas and *bourekas* (stuffed pastries).

Israel and the Palestinian Territories' religious Jews and Muslims observe specific sets of dietary laws, the former known as kosher and the latter as halal. Though they have a number of elements in common (for example the prohibition of pork and the same basic methods of slaughter), there are marked differences between the two, and a number of subtle grades of both practices.

Generally speaking, keeping kosher means not mixing meat and dairy products, and refraining from the consumption of pork, shellfish or wild fowl; as in Muslim slaughter houses, animals for consumption must be killed while fully conscious, their throats slit with a non-serrated blade. In largely secular Israel, keeping kosher in restaurants is a matter of choice, with kosher restaurants generally divided between 'dairy' (basically vegetarian) and 'meat' restaurants. In Tel Aviv, however, you'll find kosher restaurants the exception rather than the rule, and pork and shrimp are in no short supply. Alcohol isn't prohibited within Judaism; on the contrary, most Jewish festivals involve reciting the *kiddush* (blessing over wine) and you'll find some excellent kosher – and nonkosher – wines in Israel.

A question you're likely to hear at breakfast time in Israel: would you like *betzei ayin* (sunny-side-up), *beitzim mekushkashot* (scrambled), a *chavita* (omelette) or just a *beitza kasha* (hard-boiled egg)?

Because the Palestinian Territories are predominantly Muslim, food is handled according to halal standards. Again, you'll find few bacon sandwiches here, but there are no issues with eating sea creatures such as lobster, oysters and squid under Islamic law. Alcohol, on the other hand, is not permitted within Islam and you'll find it's mostly (though not entirely) Christians patronising Palestinian bars.

YALLA, LET'S EAT!

For every Jewish holiday, there's an accompanying set of foods, which appear in the shops a few weeks beforehand. Here are a few of the key ingredients in the Jewish calendar.

» Bitter herbs, salt water, a lamb shank bone, *haroset* (a sweet paste of grated apple, nuts, sweet wine and perhaps dates) and a boiled egg each symbolise aspects of the Exodus story. A typical Ashkenazi feast includes chicken soup, gefilte fish (poached cod or carp balls) and plenty of wine. Bread, however, is off the menu (even selling it is forbidden by law in Jewish areas) and is replaced by matzah, those unleavened crackers, made of just flour and water, that you either love or hate.

» Celebrating the revelation at Sinai, Shavuot is a time when anything goes, so long as it's dairy; cheese-based dishes make a big appearance on Israeli menus.

» Jewish New Year comes in for a sweet start with honey-dipped apples, sweet round *challah* bread and honey cake.

» Nothing at all; many Israelis (religious and secular) fast for 25 hours, then break it with a feast.

» Known by Christians as the Feast of the Tabernacles, Sukkot commemorates the wandering of the Israelites in the desert. Observant Jews eat supper in a *sukkah* (rectangular hut with a flat roof made of branches), which is usually decorated with fruits of the autumn harvest.

» Stuff yourself with *sufganiot* (jam doughnuts) – an Israeli contribution to the holiday – and fried potato latkes (pancakes) to commemorate the Jewish Festival of Light and the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem.

» An assortment of dried fruits and nuts are devoured on the New Year for Trees, a time when kids and adults alike plant trees.

» *Oznei Haman* ('Ears of Haman'): triangular pastries with poppy-seed, prune or date filling, commemorating the defeat of the arch-villain, Hamam, in the Purim story.

Festivals & Special Occasions

Israel

Food has always been crucial to all Jewish festivals and special occasions, either notable for its prevalence (as at weddings, bar/bat

mitzvahs or Passover) or its absence (as at Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, when a 25-hour fast is kept).

The 'big cheeses' in Israel are *Bulgarit* (Bulgarian cheese, similar to feta), *emek* (a yellow cheese), *Tsfatit* (a soft, set cheese, originally from Tsfat) and – a huge national favourite – cottage cheese.

Many Israeli families, whether religious or not, keep to the tradition of the Shabbat (Sabbath) dinner: a meal held together on a Friday evening, which commences, in some homes, with the lighting of Shabbat candles and the sipping of wine. In religious families, all work is forbidden on Shabbat, from 18 minutes before sundown on Friday to one hour after sundown on Saturday, and thus slow-cooked dishes make up Saturday's lunchtime fare.

At Israeli weddings and bar/bat mitzvahs, food is especially important. For these events, families typically invite a few hundred people to enjoy a huge hot buffet of meat, fish, cooked vegetables and rice, before the night descends into a party.

Food also has a part to play at funerals: when Jews mourn a member of their immediate family, Judaism requires that they sit *shiva,* ie stay at home in mourning for seven days after the funeral. Some continue the tradition of eating a symbolic meal of bread, to signify sustenance, and boiled eggs and lentils, whose circular shape represents continuation of life. Others find their fridges and freezers overflowing, as every guest paying a condolence call brings along a pie, cake or casserole.

The role of food in Israeli Arab households is similar to the customs followed in the Palestinian Territories; read on for more details.

Palestinian Territories

Ramadan is the Muslim period of fasting, when the observant abstain from eating (along with drinks, cigarettes and sex) during a whole month's daylight hours. Many awaken before sunrise to eat, since they won't eat again until the *iftar,* the daily breaking-of-the-fast feast at dusk. The best-known treat of this season is *qatayif,* a pancake folded over a cluster of crushed nuts or small mound of cheese and drizzled with sugar syrup. For savoury significance, lamb is served during the feast of sacrifice, Eid al-Adha.

During periods of mourning, bitter Arab coffee replaces the sugared variety.

The three 'M's – *mjadarah* (rice and lentils topped with fried onions), *mensef* (bread covered in broiled lamb and rice) and *maklubi* ('upside-down' layers of chicken or lamb in rice) – are Bedouin and Palestinian specialities.

When a baby is born, relatives might prepare *mughly,* a spice-laden rice pudding said to aid lactation.

For the big holidays and celebrations, certain things are givens: grainy cookies made of buttery semolina and stuffed with dates or nuts, called *maamool,* and a host of honeyed pastries and sweets including baklava, are carried into host homes in wrapped bakery trays by invited guests.

FRUIT OF THE VINE

Israel's love affair with wine goes back a long way. The ancient Israelites, Greeks, Romans and Nabataeans all cultivated wine in the region due to its fertile land and excellent grape-growing climate. The modern Israeli wine industry was founded by Baron Edmond de Rothschild who, in 1892, helped establish the **Carmel Winery** (*www.carmelwines.co.il/en*) in Rishon LeZion (south of Jaffa) and Zichron Ya'acov (south of Haifa); both vineyards still operate today.

The country's current wine revolution, however, began in the early '80s, when the Upper Galilee and Golan regions were planted out with grapes to create cabernets, merlots, chardonnays, sauvignon blancs and other popular varieties. Now you can even find new Israeli wineries in the Judean Hills and the arid Negev Highlands (Click here). Israeli wines, from the old established names to the exclusive tiny boutique ventures, are generally akin to Australian and Californian wines in taste and liveliness.

Notable wineries include **Tishbi** (*www.tishbi.com*) in Binyamina, the **Golan Heights Winery** (*www.golanwines.co.il*) on the Golan and **Yatir** (*www.yatir.net*) in Arad. In the West Bank, you might also occasionally spot a wine (*'nabid'* in Arabic) produced by the monks of the Cremisan monastery, in Beit Jala, near Bethlehem.

Where to Eat & Drink

There is no topping Tel Aviv when it comes to quality and variety. In recent years, Tel Aviv and its neighbour Jaffa have become international-calibre dining destinations, with food options for every budget, and an especially bumper crop of high-end individual brasseries and 'chef restaurants'. Jerusalem, too, has plenty of dining choices, though many of them, unlike Tel Aviv, are kosher. However,

Local Brews

» Goldstar, dark lager
» Maccabee, pale lager
» Alexander, boutique ale

» Taybeh, Palestinian beer

unique dining experiences can be found all over the country, ranging from seafood institutions in Akko to Bedouin blowouts in the Negev, and from locally raised steaks on the Golan to vegetarian feasts in Amirim in the Upper Galilee.

Although Be'er Sheva and Jerusalem both have lively student scenes, the best bars are found in Tel Aviv. Aside from sports pubs and dance bars, the city is home to a new crop of boutique breweries serving international and Israeli beers. For high-quality wineries, head to the Golan Heights, Carmel Mountains or Negev Highlands.

Wherever you eat out, a tip of at least 10% of the bill is widely expected and waiters will have no qualms reminding you if you forget.

In the Palestinian Territories, Ramallah and Bethlehem both sport the best top-end dining options, though the very best food is generally cheap and cheerful: the felafel, grilled meats and even the *ka'ek* (elongated sesame bagels). Nablus, meanwhile, is justifiably famous for its sweets. Come here for hot *kunafeh,* a flat cheese cake, served hot, made with melted white Nabulsi cheese topped with orange-coloured vermicelli-like pastry and soaked in rosewater syrup. While in Hebron, look out for *kedra* (a rice and lamb dish, infused with saffron and steamed inside a ceramic jar).

The Mediterranean Menu

If the Bible were to be rewritten today, the Holy Land probably wouldn't be called the 'land of milk and honey' but rather the 'land of meatballs and hummus'. Just like the people, food here is a Mediterranean mix of European and Middle Eastern flavours, with more than a pinch of spice. Here's a taste of the local food and drink...

Saint Pita

1 Baking and breaking bread is another tradition that unites all peoples in the region. What is hummus without pita, shwarma without *laffa* or Shabbat without *challah*?

Olives to Die For

2 Olives often come as a simple side dish with meals or glasses of beer but they do have an almost religious significance in Israel. Mentioned in the Bible numerous times, the olive tree is a symbol of abundance, blessing and peace.

A Culture of Coffee

3 Coffee is part of the constitution. Israelis seem to plan their day around their next *kafeh hafuch* (a cappuccino) or *kafeh shachor* (Turkish black coffee). In Tel Aviv, making coffee is an art form – look out for flowery patterns in your froth.

Felafel Phenomena

4 The undisputed king of Israeli fast food is the felafel, a fried ball of ground chickpeas served with hummus, tahina and salad. Be warned: this vegetarian snack is very, very addictive.

The Heart of Hummus

5 You won't travel far in Israel and the Palestinian Territories without seeing a plate of warm hummus. Made from chickpeas, garlic, olive oil and additional spices, it's usually served with pita bread – perfect for brunch, lunch, dinner or all of the above.

Clockwise from top left
1. Pita breads 2. An array of olives 3. Coffee 4. Felafel

Dan Savery Raz

Tel Aviv, The Negev, The Gaza Strip Dan travelled around Europe and North America for Channel 4's A Place in the Sun magazine before moving from leafy London to sandy Tel Aviv with his wife in 2008. Now a real 'Tel Avivi', he can often be found walking his dog, Boots, or dipping into a plate of hummus. A contributor to Lonely Planet's *Best in Travel*, *Happy* and *Street Food*, he has also written articles for Haaretz. Dan occasionally dabbles in fiction and published *The Last Stanza* – a poetry anthology that fundraised for African refugees in Tel Aviv; for details see www.danscribe.com.

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Michael Kohn

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Dan Savery Raz

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'Jordan is an example…of how to modernise while preserving cherished ancient traditions.'

by Daniel Savery Raz

04 JORDAN

POPULATION 6.5 MILLION

FOREIGN VISITORS PER YEAR 4.5 MILLION

CAPITAL AMMAN

LANGUAGE ARABIC

MAJOR INDUSTRIES TOURISM, BANKING, CEMENT

UNIT OF CURRENCY JORDANIAN DINAR (JD)

COST INDEX MIDRANGE HOTEL DOUBLE ROOM JD50 (US$70), DORM ROOM JD10 (US$14), BEDOUIN MAQLOOBEH MEAL JD5 (US$7), TWO-HOUR TAXI RIDE FROM AQABA TO PETRA JD55 (US$77), HORSEBACK RIDE THROUGH THE SIQ AT PETRA JD7 (US$9.80)

THIS BEDOUIN MAN HAS MANY STRINGS TO HIS OUD

TIM BARKER » LPI

WHY GO IN 2012? SHIFTING SANDS

The word is getting out that Jordan is not just about Petra and Indiana Jones. Yes, the ancient 'Red Rose city' is still the jewel in Jordan's crown, but sights such as Wadi Rum, Jerash and Madaba are adding weight to the country's tourism boom. One of the most open, friendly and welcoming nations in the Middle East, Jordan is an example to other states in the region of how to modernise while preserving cherished ancient traditions.

This year marks the 64th birthday of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. A relative baby on the global scene, it was under British control until the end of WWII. Today nobody represents the modern, moderate Jordan better than Queen Rania; one of Earth's most powerful women, she regularly tweets for peace, a valuable commodity in this part of the world. Jordan is a key player thanks to its skills in maintaining good relations with the USA, Israel and the Arab world simultaneously – no mean feat in such a volatile region.

Though poverty is still rife, Jordan's economy is on the up, and its history and tourist infrastructure make it one of the most accessible Arab states for English-speaking travellers. Aside from the established attractions, be sure to check out downtown Amman, with its ultramodern property developments, and Aqaba, which could soon overtake Eilat and Dahab as the top Red Sea desert and diving resort.

LIFE-CHANGING EXPERIENCES

Hike through the psychedelic rock canyons of Wadi Rum, approach Petra on horseback through the Siq and experience the wonder of the candlelit 'Petra by Night' tour. Then time-travel to ancient Rome at the pristine ruins of Jerash, climb up to a crusader castle

GO PSYCHEDELIC WITHOUT ILLEGAL SUBSTANCES AT WADI AL FIDAN GORGE

GIL GIUGLIO–CORBIS

at Karak or dive to a sunken Lebanese shipwreck in the Red Sea. After the action, enjoy a dish of *maqloobeh* (upside-down chicken and rice) followed by a cup of Bedouin coffee, or get pampered at a luxurious Dead Sea spa resort.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

- Twisting and turning past the spectacular Roman ruins of Jerash before ending at the Dead Sea, the Jordan International Rally in April is always a big thrill for motorsport fans.
- Run from Amman to the lowest point on earth in April's Dead Sea Ultra Marathon – the most gruelling of events.
- The floodlit Artemis temple sets the backdrop for the Jerash Festival of Art and Culture, showcasing symphony orchestras, ballet and Shakespeare plays in July and August.

RECENT FAD

Wi-fi in the *wadi*. Many hotels in Jordan now have wi-fi connectivity and it's common to see Bedouin tour guides with smartphones and laptops in the middle of the desert.

HOT TOPIC OF THE DAY

Reform not revolution. Since King Abdullah II took the throne in 1999, Jordan has made much economic progress, yet unemployment, oil and food prices remain high. Inspired by other revolutions in the region, the Islamic Action Front (IAF), the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood, has demanded sweeping reforms. But judging by the posters seen all over the country, the king is still very much revered by Jordanians.

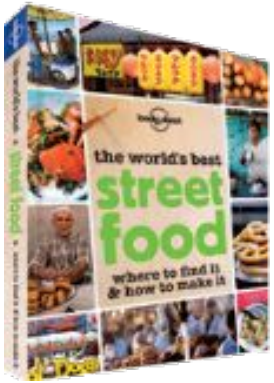
RANDOM FACTS

- In 1933 the remains of a 4th-century AD church were found at the summit of Jebel Naba (Mt Nebo), where Moses is said to have died.
- The Dana Nature Reserve, the most biodiverse area in the country, is home to 703 plant species and is the southernmost area in the world to host the Mediterranean cypress tree.
- Wadi Rum provided the widescreen desert backdrop for much of David Lean's 1962 film *Lawrence of Arabia*.
- King Abdullah II appeared in *Star Trek: Voyager* in 1996 and toured California on a Harley-Davidson in 2010, but is no longer allowed to sky dive.

MOST BIZARRE SIGHT

Housed inside the Greek Orthodox church of St George is the Madaba Map. Dating from around AD 560, only a quarter of the original mosaic remains, but it includes detailed drawings of the Nile and Jordan rivers, the Dead Sea and Jerusalem – all extraordinarily accurate for its day. Look closely and you'll also see fish, gazelles and, quite randomly, a lion. Intended as a guide for religious pilgrims, these two million tiles were the Google Earth of their day.

STREET FOOD, 2013



* Felafel *

ISRAEL

Felafel is fast food without all the fuss. Simple and affordable, this chickpea ball has been filling bellies in the Middle East for centuries and has rolled all over the world.

What is It?

The classic felafel is a deep-fried ball made from ground chickpeas, garlic, coriander and other spices. In Israel felafel can be eaten at any hour of the day or night. Felafel can be served on its own but most popularly comes with heaps of fresh salad in a sturdy pita bread. Hummus is optional, but without it, a felafel somehow feels, well, naked.

Origin

The origin of felafel, like everything else in the Middle East, is the cause for much heated discussion. Arabic, Jewish, Indian, Greek or Turkish – its roots are unclear. Despite the felafel's similarities with chickpea dishes in India, the most common theory is that it was eaten by the early Coptic Christians during Lent in Egypt and journeyed across Arabia, where it was a popular way for Muslims to break the fast at Ramadan. Adopted by Mizrahi Jews living in Arab countries as it suited the kosher diet, the felafel finally found its home in Israel in a pita and became the national dish.

Tasting

A felafel is a quick snack usually found on some busy street corner, but it's also something to be savoured with each bite. The experience begins in the queue – if you're lucky, the cook will give you a baking-hot ball straight from the pan. Whe ordering, there are important decisions to make such as whether to add chips, onions, chopped parsley or chilli sauce. Pouring tahini on top is recommended, but not too much in case the bre becomes soggy. It's easy to make a mess while munching on this masterpiece of refreshing sala tangy pickled cucumbers and smooth, creamy hummus. But the best thing about felafel is that i expands – halfway through you can add more sa fillings. Eventually, all good things come to an en and at the bottom of the pita you'll find those las fried balls, the foundation of any felafel.

Finding It

Everyone in Israel will tell you they know the best felafel stand. But Gabai, in Bograshov St, Tel Aviv, is the felafel expert. A *manna* (portion in pita) cos NIS 16 (US$4.09).

• VARIATIONS • Popular with vegetarians, felafel (and felafel burgers) can today be found in cities and music festivals worldwide, coming in all shapes and sizes. Within Israel, the Tel Aviv felafel is often crispy and juicy, while in Jerusalem's Old City, Palestinians sell dry, fluffy felafel balls without any of the trimmings. In Egypt the traditional felafel is made from fava beans and you can even order a 'McFelafel' – with fries, of course.

By Dan Savery Raz

Recipe Felafel

YOU'LL NEED

- 400g (14oz) dried chickpeas (soaked overnight)
- 4 cups water
- 5 garlic cloves, minced
- ½ small onion
- ½ cup coriander leaves (cilantro), chopped
- ⅓ cup parsley, chopped
- 1 tsp paprika
- 1–2 tsp ground cumin
- 1 cup breadcrumbs
- 2 tbs flour
- 2 tsp bicarb soda (baking soda)
- 1 egg
- 2 tsp salt
- 2 tsp fresh ground pepper
- vegetable oil for deep-frying
- 1 cup of flour for dipping
- 4 pita breads
- hummus, pesto or chilli sauce (optional)
- salad vegetables
- tahini (sesame paste)

METHOD

1. Cook the soaked chickpeas in 4 cups water for 30 minutes, drain and put in a food processor (or mash) with the garlic, onion, coriander leaves, parsley and spices. Grind the mixtur until you get a rough, juicy consistency; add a little water if needed and more coriander leaves for greener felafel.
2. Pour the mixture into a big bowl. Add the breadcrumbs, fl bicarb soda, egg, salt and pepper. Stir the mixture well and l to stand for 30 minutes.
3. Roll the mixture into about 16 small balls and flatten into p
4. Heat about 8cm (3in) of vegetable oil in a saucepan. Dip t felafel balls into flour and deep-fry about five at a time until crispy brown (if the felafel crumbles, add more flour to the mixture). When cooked, put the felafel on a paper towel to
5. Stuff four or five felafels into each pita bread with humm salad, tahina or even pesto, and serve hot.

SERVES 4

GREAT ESCAPES, 2013

CHIC AND CHEAP: ON A TUSCAN BUDGET

YOU DON'T NEED TO BREAK THE BANK TO ENJOY 'LA BELLA VITA' IN TUSCANY. FROM SUN-DAPPLED HILLS AND SOME OF THE WORLD'S GREATEST ART TO FRESH, RUSTIC FOOD AND WINE, HERE THE BEST THINGS IN LIFE CAN BE, WELL, ALMOST FREE.

Saturday morning in Siena and the sunlight sweeps the contours of Il Campo's old brick pavement. Here, Italians in designer shades sip their third cappuccino of the day and flick through the newspapers, seemingly oblivious to the medieval Palazzo Publico and its 14th-century bell tower, the Torre del Mangia. Although breakfast was only two hours ago, you devour a tiramisu ice-cream cone from a nearby gelateria as the Duomo's church bells chime.

Tuscany is all about indulgence. This celebrated region in the northwest of Italy has a reputation for offering some of the best pasta, pizza, steak and wine in Europe. It's a feast for the eyes too: cypresses line country roads like Roman pillars and old farmhouses overlook valleys of sloping vineyards that unfold towards the horizon. Florence, the region's capital and home to Michelangelo's *David*, is itself a work of art. Red-roofed houses, Renaissance statues and cathedral spires adorn both sides of the glistening River Arno. Ancient cities like Siena, Arezzo and Lucca rise above the morning mist, each one a mysterious world of its own.

An easy and affordable way to explore a city like Lucca is on two wheels. Hire a bicycle for a day from the Puntobici bike shop near the Piazza Verdi and cycle Lucca's 5km city walls that encircle the Old Town, now a parkland trail with grass lawns, picnic tables and various species of trees. While riding along the ramparts, soak in the sights of the Apuan Alps and the rooftops of basilica-form churches, without pausing too long to notice there are no railings separating you from a 12m drop to the ground. After working up an appetite, you'll enjoy a *pranzo di lavaro* (a cheap 'working lunch') at a local cafe such as Trattoria Gigi, followed by a shot of espresso. Tuscany is only as expensive as you make it – and enjoying its ancient cities and romantic landscapes won't cost the earth.

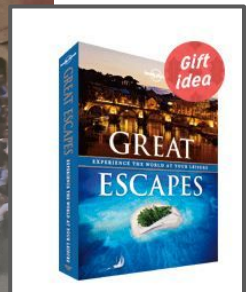
ESSENTIAL EXPERIENCES

- **Sampling wines along the 'vineyard-hopping' S222 Route in Chianti.**
- Cycling the city walls of Lucca, complete with lush parklands and vantage points.
- **Staring in awe at the sheer perfection of Michelangelo's *David* at the Galleria della Accademia in Florence – it makes other sculptures look like, well, stone.**
- Tucking into a juicy *bistecca alla fiorentina* in the peaceful village of Panzano.
- **Climbing up the Duomo in Florence to gaze at the rooftops of this majestic Renaissance city.**
- Eating tiramisu icecream overlooking the bowl-shaped Il Campo Piazza in Siena.

LOCATION NORTHWEST ITALY | **BEST TIME OF YEAR** MAY TO SEPTEMBER | **IDEAL TIME COMMITMENT** ONE TO TWO WEEKS
ESSENTIAL TIP SHOP AT LOCAL MARKETS FOR BEST-PRICED BREADS, CHEESE, HAM AND WINES | **BUDGET** $ | **PACK** A GOOD BOO
MAP AND CAMERA, BUT LEAVE SPACE FOR BOTTLES OF OLIVE OIL AND CHIANTI

PIAZZA OF PASSION

Thousands of Sienese cheer in unison, roars ricocheting off the Campo's walls, as a tornado of dust and colours flies past. Welcome to the Palio di Siena – annual horse races held on July 2 and August 16. Lasting just three laps (or 90 seconds), the Palio has the intense atmosphere of a Roman chariot race. Passions run high as the *contrades* (city districts) compete for the coveted Drappellone, a large painted canvas. If not fazed by crowds or the sight of horses falling, head to the Campo early, with the locals in their historical costumes, and watch the race for free.



The Perfect Getaway

Nothing prepares you for seeing Michelangelo's *David* 'in the flesh'. Walking slowly around the statue, the centrepiece of Florence's Galleria della Accademia, it's easy to become mesmerized by its detail...but this is just the beginning of your Tuscan love affair. In the Piazza della Signoria, Cellini's gruesome sculpture of Perseus holding Medusa's severed head seems to come to life. Nearby, you can spend many cheap hours wandering the galleries of the Uffizi Museum, a universe of art that includes Botticelli's dream-like *Birth of Venus*.

When your stomach tells you it's time to eat, stroll down the Via de' Macci to the farmers market and grab some bread and prosciutto before browsing the Mercato Centrale. South of here is the Duomo, a gothic domed cathedral: climb its 463 steps for a bird's-eye view of the city. Stay at a family-run B&B for a more intimate Florentine experience; the Relais del Duomo is one such gem.

After Florence, head down Route S222 to Siena and soak up the best of the Chianti wine district. Stop midway and rent a mountain bike in Greve to discover the area; ride up the hill to Verrazzano Castle and take a wine-tasting tour of its famous cellars.

In Siena, check into the Hotel Alma Domus. Part of an old monastery, its renovated rooms overlook the San Domenico Basilica. For dinner, tuck into spicy Sienese spaghetti or some wild boar at the Trattoria Papei behind the Palazzo Pubblico. While you're here, head to the Campo, one of Italy's great squares, then grab a combo museum ticket from the Museo Civico. South of Siena, end your Tuscan odyssey with a dip in the Petriolo Baths, natural hot springs in a woodland setting. Part of the Farma River, they're free to use and the soothing sulphuric water bubbles away at a pleasant 42°C. Who needs a fortune to live the good life?

DECKCHAIR

- ***Under the Tuscan Sun*** (Frances Mayes) The most popular Tuscany memoir, in which an American divorcee renovates a dilapidated old house in Cortona.
- ***Too Much Tuscan Sun*** (Dario Castagno) A light-hearted take on Tuscan tourism by a local guide – an antidote to all those expat titles.
- ***A Room with a View*** (1985) Merchant Ivory adaptation of Forster's novel partly set in Florence, starring Helena Bonham Carter.
- ***War in Val D'Orcia*** (Iris Origo) Intimate diary by a woman who protected child refugees in her villa during WWII.
- ***A Thousand Days in Tuscany*** (Marlena de Blasi) A Venetian baker and an American chef move to Tuscany in this recipe-filled novel.
- ***Tea with Mussolini*** (1999) Zeffirelli's charming Florentine biopic stars Judi Dench and Maggie Smith.

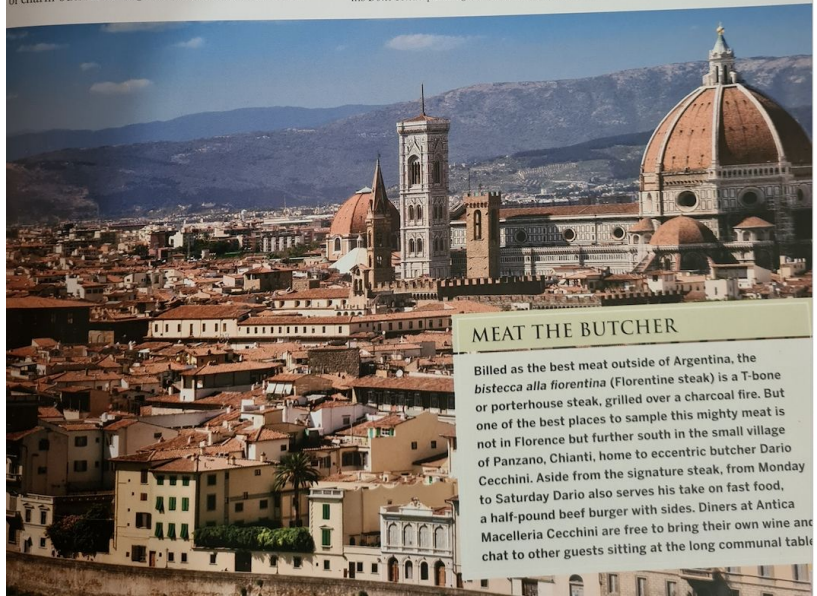
Plan It

Florence is Tuscany's transport hub, with its airport offering connections to European capitals, and Santa Maria Novella railway station, linked to Rome (90 minutes) or Milan (1¾ hours) by high-speed, low-cost trains. Reasonably priced B&Bs are found on the outskirts of Florence and Siena; more remote towns such as Castellina in Chianti offer cheaper accommodation. Most of the large towns have tourist offices and are easy to explore on foot, but for the rest of Tuscany, the only way to get around is by hire car or riding a bicycle.

Detour

Tuscany doesn't usually conjure up images of sandy beaches, moored fishing boats and clear blue waters, but that's a description of Isola d'Elba, the largest island in the Tuscan Archipelago. Overrun with day-trippers in the summer, out-of-season Elba is a hiker's heaven. Trails cover the whole island, passing Etruscan forts and tiny Catholic churches, plus scuba divers can check out a German aircraft wreck in the Tyrrhenian Sea. Napoleon was exiled here in 1814: both of his homes are open to visitors. Ferries leave from Piombino on the mainland and arrive at Portoferraio, a bustling ancient town full of charm outside of August, the peak tourist month.

OPENING SPREAD Stand in Siena's Piazza del Campo for the best view of the Palio. **ABOVE** The reconstructed Michelangelo room in Florence's Uffizi gallery opened in 2013; his *Doni Tondo* painting survives in its original round frame. **BELOW** Florence's skyline.



MEAT THE BUTCHER

Billed as the best meat outside of Argentina, the *bistecca alla fiorentina* (Florentine steak) is a T-bone or porterhouse steak, grilled over a charcoal fire. But one of the best places to sample this mighty meat is not in Florence but further south in the small village of Panzano, Chianti, home to eccentric butcher Dario Cecchini. Aside from the signature steak, from Monday to Saturday Dario also serves his take on fast food, a half-pound beef burger with sides. Diners at Antica Macelleria Cecchini are free to bring their own wine and chat to other guests sitting at the long communal table

THE ROOT LESS TRAVELLED

SECRET TAKE A LONG VIEW RATHER THAN EXPECTING INSTANT GRATIFICATION

Tradition Tu BiShvat Festival (New Year for Trees)
Date 15th day of the Jewish month of Shevat (January/February)
Celebrated in Israel

Technology can make things seem instantaneous, so much so that we expect instant gratification at the click of a button. No wonder we get frustrated when our lives move too slowly for our liking. All too often we lose patience, and sometimes give up completely on our goals when things don't turn out as planned.

Yet the simplest natural traditions can teach us important lessons about patience. In Israel, the Jewish festival of Tu BiShvat is celebrated each year with the planting of trees. Also known as the 'New Year for Trees', Tu BiShvat falls in January or February, depending on the corresponding date in the Jewish calendar, to coincide with the first budding period.

The festival represents renewal and hope for the future. Traditionally children sing songs about the almond tree and eat dates, walnuts and apricots. Aside from nurturing conservation, Tu BiShvat shows us how nature takes its time. Seeds are plant ed in winter, then sprout into saplings in spring, but it can be years before the first fruit is enjoyed.

Trees contribute so much to our mental and physical well-being, yet planting one requires dis cipline, patience and faith. It's a reminder that in life, it is far more rewarding to delay gratification and see our own efforts bear fruit.

Look carefully – are seeds you planted a long tim ago starting to flower? Remember, you also need water, space and time to grow.

* Sabich *

ISRAEL

***Sabich*, much like David facing Goliath, is an unassuming hero. This sandwich, a Jewish immigrant from Iraq, is blue-collar food at its best – fast, filling and fun to eat.**

What is it?

Sabich is a Middle Eastern sandwich of hard-boiled eggs (usually browned overnight in a low oven – see the method below), fried aubergine and tahini stuffed in pita with chopped parsley, onion, potato and salad. Often served with *amba*, a spicy Indian mango pickle, it has become an institution in Israel, where stalls selling only *sabich* appear nationwide.

Tasting

Wherever you're from, taking your first bite of *sabich* is always comforting. The familiar softness of the eggs, mushed with the thick tahini sauce, sharp onion, fresh parsley and finely chopped salad all complement *sabich*'s centrepiece – the greasy (in a good way) fried aubergine. The exotic kick to the tastebuds comes from its tangy orange sauce called *amba* (meaning 'mango' in Sanskrit). Eating *sabich* is a messy business, occasionally requiring strategic bites of the pita bread to hold it all together. The busy streets of Tel Aviv are now the undisputed home of this classic, where it provides some healthy competition to the ubiquitous falafel, although anyone with Iraqi roots would say that nobody makes *sabich* better than their grandma. What is certain, however, is that no Saturday morning is complete without it.

Origin

Derived from the word *sabah* ('morning' in Arabic), *sabich* originated in Iraq among the Jews of Baghdad, one of the world's oldest Jewish communities, who ate it on *Shabbat* (Saturday) mornings. Jewish Kashrut laws prohibit cooking on *Shabbat*, so the Iraqi Jews adopted foods that could be cooked the day before and left on a low heat overnight. For decades, this simple but ingenious meal was passed down through generations. *Sabich* was brought to Israel in the 1940s and 1950s, when 120,000 people (around 75 per cent) of Baghdadi Jews fled a hostile Iraq ruled by the then-Prime Minister Nuri al-Said.

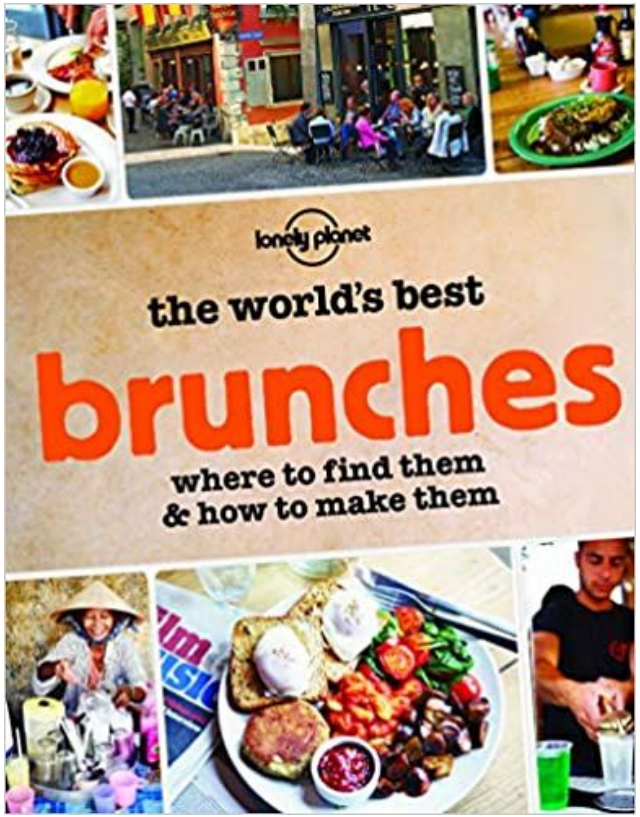
Finding it

The king of *sabich* is Oved in Givatayim, Tel Aviv, whose restaurant has cult status. Portions cost 16 NIS (US$4.35).

*** TIP * To eat *sabich* like a local, the pita bread must be stuffed with as much filling as possible and washed down with fresh mint tea. But heed this important health warning: due to its heaviness, *sabich* must be followed by a mid-morning nap on the sofa.**

* By Dan Savery Raz *

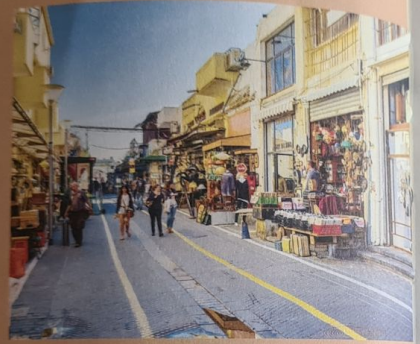
WORLD'S BEST BRUNCHES, 2015



GLOBAL BEER GUIDE, 2016

ISRAEL & THE PALESTINIAN TERRITORIES

How to order a beer? Bakbuk bira berakasha?
How to say cheers? L'Chaim! (meaning 'To life!')
Signature beer style? Amber ales with fruity flavours
Local bar snack? Olives (usually complimentary)
Don't... Be afraid to taste beers first



Not usually known for its beer, Israel and the Palestinian Territories was traditionally a winemaking region, though it's said that the Babylonian Rabbi Papa brewed beer here as early as the 4th century BC. The first modern brewery, Nesher, was founded in 1940 to quench the thirst of Aussies stationed in British Mandate Palestine. Nesher Malt beer is still sold today by Tempo, brewers of the Maccabee and Goldstar labels that dominated the Israeli market for decades. Then, in the mid-'90s, competition came from the small Palestinian village of Taybeh in the West Bank. Although alcohol is forbidden in Islam, the 1500 residents of Taybeh were allowed to produce and sell beer due to its all-Christian population. Taybeh quickly grew in popularity among young Israelis and its annual Taybeh Oktoberfest remains a crowd-puller.

But the beer buzz in Israel really began after 2005, when the first microbreweries emerged. Initially led by American immigrants, passionate about brewing quality beer, with establishments such as Dancing Camel (in Tel Aviv) and Jem's (in Petah Tikva), the craft beer trend was later adopted by Israeli brewers. Today, bottles of boutique ales such as Alexander, Malka, Negev, Bazelet and Shapiro can be found in bars and shops across Israel. Locals take time to enjoy a beer with some fresh olives or salted edamame beans; after a long day in the heat of Tel Aviv, that first sip is always welcome.

ALEXANDER BREWERY

19 Tzvi Hanahal St, Emek Hefer;
www.alexander-beer.co.il; +972 74 703 4094

◆ Food ◆ Tour
◆ Family ◆ Takeout

One of the first Israeli microbreweries, Alexander was founded in 2008 by Ori Sagy, a former Israeli Air Force pilot, who travelled the world learning about beer for more than 25 years. Located in the Hefer Valley – a green belt of kibbutzim inland from Netanya and south of Haifa – the brewhouse is named after a nearby stream. During a 45-minute tour, visitors can 'scientifically' examine the brewery equipment, imported from Braukon, Germany and enjoy some tastings. Alexander makes two main beers: Blonde, a Belgian-style fruity beer; and Ambrée, made from roasted malts. If you're lucky, you can also sample its seasonal beers – Green, has a twist of grapefruit, guava and mango, but it's Black, with dark chocolate and espresso, that satisfies the indulgent.

THINGS TO DO NEARBY

Mikhmoret Beach
One of the best beaches in Israel, with broad sand dunes, plenty of space to chill by the Mediterranean or go for a bicycle ride.

Utopia Park
This 'rainforest paradise' conservation park, part of Kibbutz Bahan, has a botanical garden housing tropical birds, fish ponds, a maze and more than 20,000 orchids. ***www.utopiapark.co.il/english***

DANCING CAMEL BREWERY

Hata'asiya 12, Tel Aviv;
www.dancingcamel.com; +972 3 624 2783

◆ Food ◆ Bar ◆ Transport
◆ Tour ◆ Takeout

'Born in the USA' but 'Made in the Middle East' this microbrewery has a transatlantic flavour. Founded by New Jersey-native and ex-Wall St trader David Cohen in 2005, it's set in a renovated 1930s warehouse in the Yad Harutzim industrial area of Tel Aviv. From the outside, it looks like a regular bar. Yet inside, it houses a US-style pub and a spacious events hall. Their brewing equipment was imported from the old Flying Pig brewery in Everett, Washington but is now used to make kosher brews.

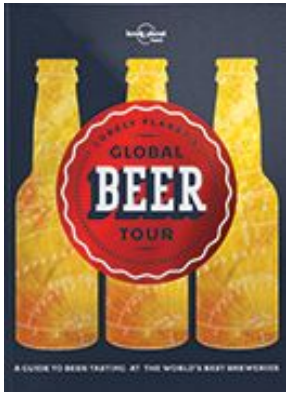
All the eight beers have an American feel, ranging from 'patriotic' orange pale ales to black stouts. Its classic is a strong but sweet ale: The Olde Papa combines hops, malts and local date honey, supposedly an ancient recip from Rabbi Papa.

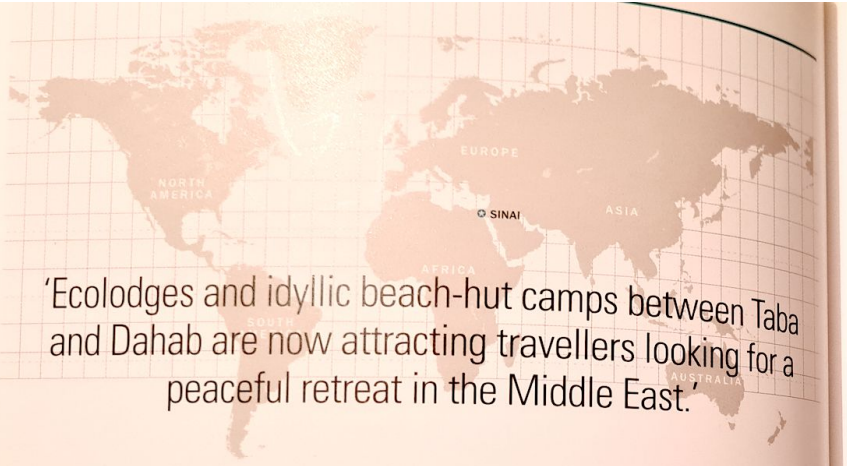
THINGS TO DO NEARBY

Sarona Market
Opened in 2015, Sarona is an upmarket indoor food market; the largest in Israel. It hosts big-name Israeli chefs, and both local and international produce. ***www.saronamarket.co.il/en***

Porter & Sons
This restaurant for beer lovers has a hearty men and also more than 50 draft beers, including l crafts, such as Shapiro Bazelet and Malka. ***porterandsons.rest.c***

© Marco Longari / Getty Images, © eFesenko / Shutterstock





'Ecolodges and idyllic beach-hut camps between Taba and Dahab are now attracting travellers looking for a peaceful retreat in the Middle East.'

By Dan Savery Raz

01

SINAI, EGYPT

- **POPULATION** 380,500 (NOT INCLUDING SUEZ CANAL)
- **MAIN TOWN** SHARM EL-SHEIKH
- **LANGUAGE** ARABIC
- **MAJOR INDUSTRY** TOURISM
- **UNIT OF CURRENCY** EGYPTIAN POUND (E£)
- **COST INDEX** HOTEL DOUBLE/DORM ROOM FOR A NIGHT E£340/80 (US$62/15), ONE-HOUR TAXI RIDE E£40 (US$7), FULL-DAY SCUBA DIVE E£350 (US$63), PLATE OF *KALAMAARI* E£40 (US$7), SUNSET TOUR FROM DAHAB TO MT SINAI E£120 (US$22)

THOU SHALT CLIMB MT SINAI FOR THE COMMANDING VIEWS

PAINT IT RED

OK, Sharm el-Sheikh is being sold for its cheap winter sun but Sinai is much more than a convenient place for Europeans to top up their tans. Away from the Costa del Camel, this mighty desert peninsula is home to a mystical red-rock mountain range, said to have played a major role in the foundation of the three major monotheistic faiths. The Red Sea's phenomenal coral reef may have brought divers from all over the globe, but in recent years a new type of tourism has emerged. Ecolodges and idyllic beach-hut camps between Taba and Dahab are now attracting travellers looking for a peaceful retreat in the Middle East. President Mubarak's government may have spent much of the past decade developing the 'Red Sea Riviera' with huge hotels and golf resorts bu parts of Sinai still have that familiar old hippy-trail vibe.

HOLY MOSES!

Every day thousands of people make the pilgrimage to a remote, barren valley in the middle of Sinai to climb the mountain where it is said Moses had a one-to-one with God. Whatever your beliefs, there is no denying the majestic views from Mt Sinai. At dawn or dusk, the summit of this mighty mount is the Holy Grail for panoramic photographs. On your ascent or descent, be sure to visit St Katherine's Monastery, which was founded in around AD 330 by the Roman Empress Helena. Today, about 20 Greek Orthodox monks live in the monastery, assisted by Bedouins and Muslims of the Jebeliyah tribe. Don't miss the amazing Monastery Museum, home to some of the oldest books on earth including part of the Codex Sinaiticus, Christianity's earliest New Testament. Thou shalt not be disappointed.

DEFINING EXPERIENCE

Explore one of the world's most beautiful coral reefs at the Ras Abu Gallum Protectorate, then take a camel trek to Coloured Canyon and learn the true meaning of 'psychedelic rock'. The next day climb Mt Sinai at dawn, then spend the rest of the day lazing on a hammock on the sand-dune beaches of Tarabin and at night recline with a sheesha pipe on the shores of the Red Sea.

MARK DAFFEY ▪ LP

SO THAT'S WHERE THOSE LITTLE COCKTAIL UMBRELLAS COME FROM! SHARM EL-SHEIKH TURNS ON THE CHARM

THE GREEN SCENE

Today before the terms 'ecotourism' and 'green tourism' were bandied around, the Bedouin of Sinai were using sustainable building methods along the Red Sea coast. Started in 1982, Basata, which means 'simplicity' in Arabic, is Egypt's first ecolodge. Consisting of bamboo huts and mud-brick chalets, the camp uses only organic produce, recycles all its rubbish and is now one of the best-known camps in the region. And the green idea seems to be catching on. Inland in the St Katherine Protectorate lies the more remote ecolodge Al-Karm, built on an ancient Nabatean settlement. Even in Dahab, local businesses such as Desert Divers are starting to run beach and coral reef clean-ups for conscientious campers.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

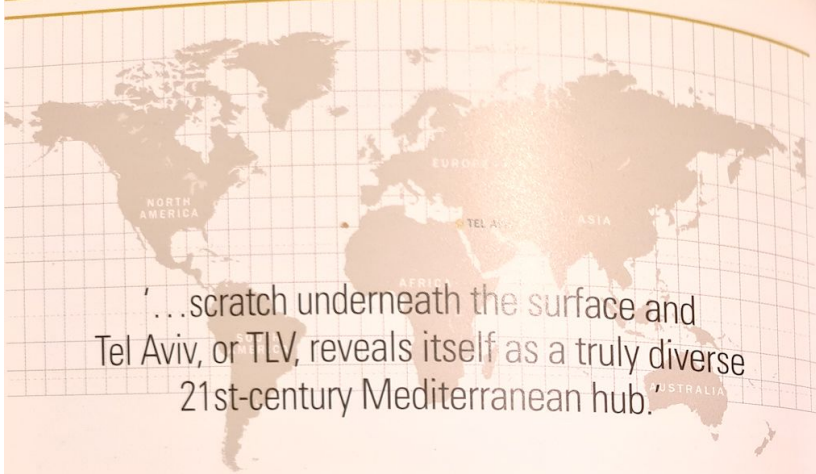
- Forget bunnies and chocolate eggs; instead celebrate Easter in April at St Katherine's, the world's oldest functioning Christian monastery.
- Running a marathon in the desert may sound like lunacy, but that's exactly what you can do in November at the SharMarathon. Held at Ras Mohammed National Park, the sand dunes, red rock mountains and turquoise waters make for an inspiring backdrop.
- Sharm el-Sheikh's Old Market comes alive with four days of fireworks, parades and DJs at the Sharm International Carnival in December.

RANDOM FACTS

- Sinai is the only part of Egypt located in Asia and not Africa.
- Although the Suez Canal was opened in 1869, the legendary Egyptian Pharaoh Sesostris began work on a similar canal almost 3800 years earlier in 1897 BC.
- According to the famous English archaeologist Flinders Petrie, the number of people that left Egypt in the Exodus was 27,000, not three million as has been suggested elsewhere.
- A natural habitat for rare species of fish and more than 200 types of coral, the Red Sea is the world's northernmost tropical sea.

DEFINING DIFFERENCE

Sinai feels like a separate state. Geographically it is disconnected from the rest of Egypt by the Suez and from the rest of Arabia by the Red Sea, and it is a place for healing and relaxation. Where else in Egypt can you find camps with Buddhist names like Shanti and Nirvana or take beachfront yoga lessons? After the chaos of Cairo, the Red Sea's aqua-blue waters force you to slow down and get some well-needed 'me' time.



'...scratch underneath the surface and Tel Aviv, or TLV, reveals itself as a truly diverse 21st-century Mediterranean hub.'

By Dan Savery Raz

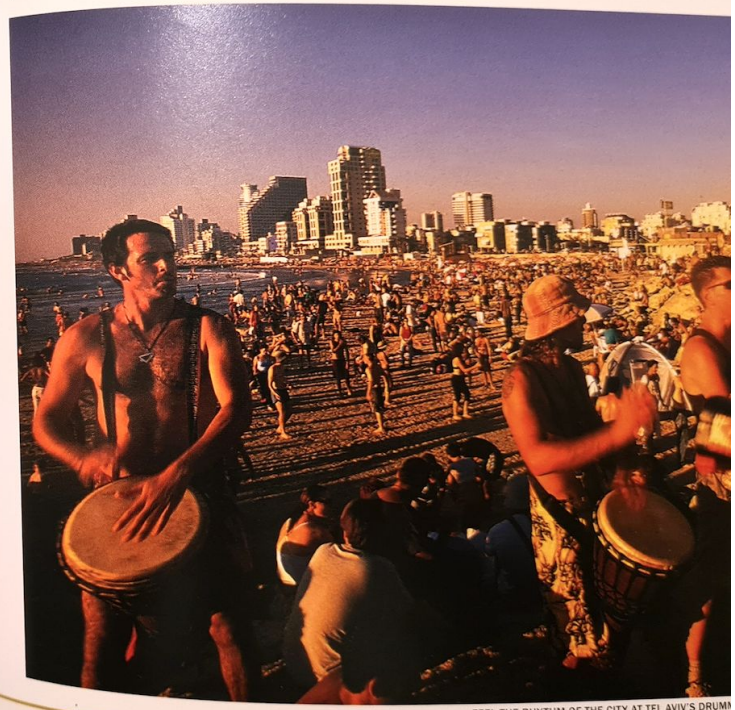
03

TEL AVIV, ISRAEL

- **POPULATION** 393,000
- **FOREIGN VISITORS PER YEAR** 710,000
- **LANGUAGES** HEBREW, ENGLISH, ARABIC, HEBRISH
- **UNIT OF CURRENCY** NEW ISRAELI SHEKEL (NIS)
- **COST INDEX** CAPPUCCINO 11NIS (US$3), HOSTEL DORM BED/HOTEL DOUBLE FOR A NIGHT 180/330NIS (US$49/90), SHORT TAXI RIDE 25NIS (US$6.80), RESTAURANT MAIN COURSE 50NIS (US$13.60), FALAFEL 16NIS (US$4.35), NIGHTCLUB ENTRY 60NIS (US$16.30)

VIVA TEL AVIV!

Tel Aviv is the total flipside of Jerusalem, a modern Sin City on the sea rather than an ancient Holy City on a hill. Hedonism is the one religion that unites its inhabitants. There are more bars than synagogues, God is a DJ and everyone's body is a temple. Yet, scratch underneath the surface and Tel Aviv, or TLV, reveals itself as a truly diver 21st-century Mediterranean hub. By far the most international city in Israel, Tel Aviv is also home to a large gay community, a kind of San Francisco in the Middle East. Thanks to its university and museums, it is also the greenhouse for Israel's growing film and music scenes. In recent years, TLV has been on the tour maps of the world's biggest stars, from Paul McCartney to Madonna and Leonard Cohen. After recoverin from an almighty hangover following its 100th birthday celebrations in 2009, Tel Avi now looking forward to its second century of progress.



FEEL THE RHYTHM OF THE CITY AT TEL AVIV'S DRUM

BAUHAUS TO BOUTIQUE

Like JRR Tolkien's fictional Minas Tirith, Tel Aviv is often called the 'White City'. This nickname refers to its Bauhaus architecture, which received Unesco World Heritage status in 2003. Although nearby Jaffa has been around for some 4000 years, Tel Aviv is still in its infancy. The city only really started to grow in the 1930s with the arrival of modernist German-Jewish architects who fled the Nazis. Nowadays some of these old Bauhaus blocks are looking pretty shabby and so TLV is getting some much needed TLC. Tel Aviv's first town, Neve Tzedek, has been transformed into a tourist and cultural centre lined with boutique shops, galleries and hotels. Somehow the city managed to avoid the worst of the credit crisis and is experiencing a property boom. As the mayor plans to expand the city's business zones, there is no better time to see a city in flux.

DEFINING EXPERIENCE

Bargain your way through the chaotic Carmel Market for a raw slice of the city's past, check out the Tel Aviv Art Museum, then play a game of *matkot* (bat and ball) on Hilton Beach. Next, try eating some of the world's best hummus in the Yemenite Quarter, sipping wine in Neve Tzedek and taking in a dance performance at the Suzanne Dellal Centre. The next day learn how to windsurf on the Med, visit the Diaspora Museum, stroll through Park HaYarkon and cool down with an ice cream on the city's port. Finally, visit the pubs on Nahalat Binyamin St and catch some laser beams at The Block nightclub.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

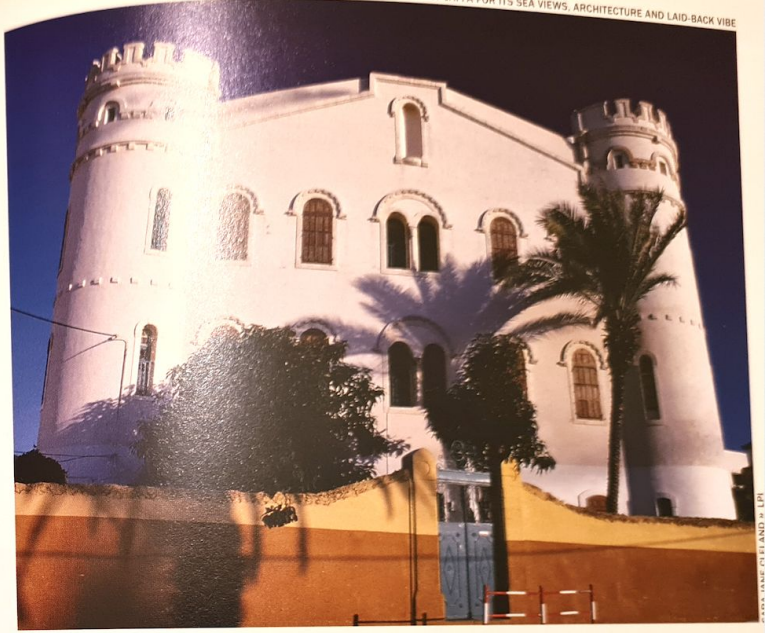
- The fashionable neighbourhood of Florentine is the place to be on 20 March as thousands of people in fancy dress spill out onto the streets to celebrate the Jewish festival of Purim.
- Check out some all-night music on Rothschild Blvd in May, where concert pianists, saxophonists, traditional *klezmer* and funk bands mix it up for Laila Lavan (the White Night).
- In June the city comes alive with rainbow flags as it holds the 13th annual Gay Pride Parade, by far the biggest of its kind in the Middle East. The parade of sparkling floats, disco divas and muscle men ends with a huge dance party on the beach.
- Part of a triangle that links Tel Aviv, Athens and Istanbul, ArtTLV is an ultracool biennial art event in September that explores multicultural identities.

WHAT'S HOT...

Frozen yoghurt, Facebook, bacon, good hummus, designer shades, gourmet burgers, dogs, rooftop bars, beach volleyball, the '90s.

WHAT'S NOT...

Kosher ice cream, Ahmadinejad, bad hummus, men in thongs, fast food, cats, basement bars, cricket, the '80s.



© LONELY PLANET & LPI

TRIBAL VIBES

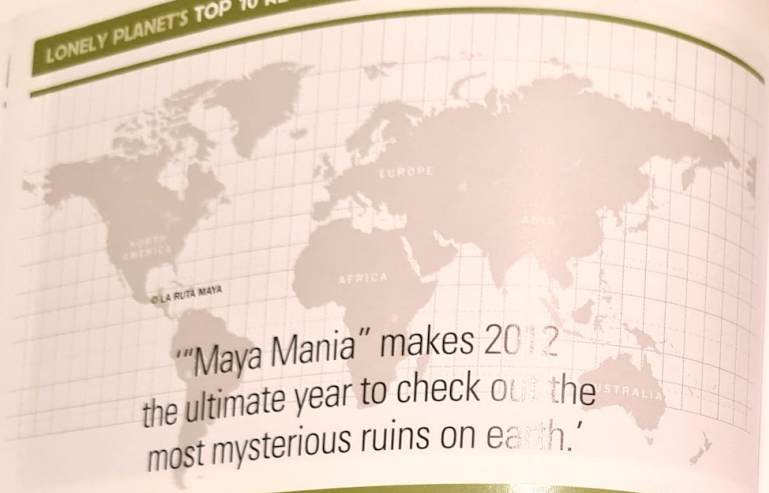
There is no better way to start the weekend than dancing along to a hypnotic tribal beat at the Drumming Beach. Every Friday at sundown the Dolphinarium Beach near Jaffa reverberates with this rhythmic gathering of Africans, Israelis and tourists.

BEST SHOPPING

Sometimes called the 'Bubble', Sheinken St is a world away from the air-conditioned malls found elsewhere in the city. Set in the heart of the gay village, it is lined with trendy fashion shops, fruit-shake stalls and the city's best people-watching cafes.

CLASSIC PLACE TO STAY

Housed inside a restored Italian-style villa originally constructed in 1922, the boutique Hotel Montefiore is Tel Aviv's most lavish residence. The restaurant, with a menu described as 'brasserie cuisine under a Vietnamese spell', is fast becoming one of the top places to dine in town.



'"Maya Mania" makes 2012 the ultimate year to check out the most mysterious ruins on earth.'

by Dan Savery Raz

02 LA RUTA MAYA, CENTRAL AMERICA

- **POPULATION** YUCATÁN & CHIAPAS 8 MILLION, GUATEMALA 15 MILLION, HONDURAS 7.8 MILLION, BELIZE 307,899
- **MAIN TOWNS** CANCÚN, GUATEMALA CITY
- **LANGUAGE** CENTRAL AMERICAN SPANISH, ENGLISH
- **MAJOR INDUSTRIES** TOURISM, COFFEE, SUGAR, BANANAS
- **UNIT OF CURRENCY** MEXICAN PESOS (M$), GUATEMALAN QUETZALS (Q), HONDURAN LEMPIRAS (L), BELIZE DOLLARS (BZ$)
- **COST INDEX** BOTTLE OF BEER US$0.70-3, THREE-HOUR BUS RIDE US$3.50-10, DOUBLE HOTEL ROOM US$8-35, WEEK OF SPANISH CLASSES WITH HOMESTAY US$100-200

WHERE THERE'S PALAPAS, JARANAS AND MUSIC, THERE'LL BE DANCING IN THE STREETS

TONY WHEELER © LPI

WHY GO IN 2012? APOCALYPSE NOW OR STAR TREK?

Where did the original Maya come from? Why did they disappear? No one really knows. But we do know that in medicine, mathematics and astronomy, the ancient Maya of Central America were galaxies ahead of the Old World. They developed a sophisticated water irrigation system, aligned their temples to form patterns with the stars and created a complex 13-month lunar calendar. This calendar is at the centre of 2012's end-of-the-world prophecies.

Archaeologists have long known that 21 December 2012 marks the end of the Mayan calendar's 'Long Count' (or 13th *baktun*) and the date is largely ignored by the modern Maya tribe. But 24/7 news, Hollywood movies and apocalyptic blogs have spawned some serious doomsday hype, though others say the date heralds a positive new era of human consciousness.

Whatever your view, all this 'Maya Mania' makes 2012 the ultimate year to check out the most mysterious ruins on earth. More of a universe than a region, La Ruta Maya (the Mayan Route) spans the Yucatán Peninsula and Chiapas in Mexico, plus Belize,

Guatemala and Honduras. The must-see Mayan cities include Tikal, Copán, Palenque and Chichén Itzá. But the lesser-known Cobá, Uxmal, Edzna and Yaxchilán are just as enchanting. So whether it's the end of the world as we know it or just another year, La Ruta Maya is always cosmic.

LIFE-CHANGING EXPERIENCES

The Mayan Route is not just about climbing pyramids in the jungle. It's also about scuba diving on a coral reef off the Caribbean island of Cozumel, brushing up your Spanish in the colonial city of Antigua, exploring the Mayan markets of San Cristóbal de las Casas, spotting howler monkeys in Jeannette Kawas National Park and swimming in the waterfalls of Agua Azul. For peace, top-up on tranquillity at Lake Atitlán, with its three dormant volcanoes, hang-out in a hammock in Tulum or soak up reggae vibes in the car-free island of Caye Caulker.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

- The costumes are as colourful as the old colonial houses at Campeche's Carnaval in late February and early March.
- A gruelling five-day canoe race from the foothills of the Maya Mountains to Belize City, La Ruta Maya River Challenge in March is open to all.
- Chichén Itzá is the only place to be on the Vernal Equinox (20 March) and Autumnal Equinox (22 September), as sun and shadow create a serpent slithering down the El Castillo pyramid.
- Bonfires and fireworks light the night sky for Quema del Diablo (Burning of the Devil) in Guatemala on 7 December, representing the ridding of past evils.

WHAT'S HOT...

Holistic healing in Yucatán. Eco-resorts in Belize. Meditation retreats around Lake Atitlán.

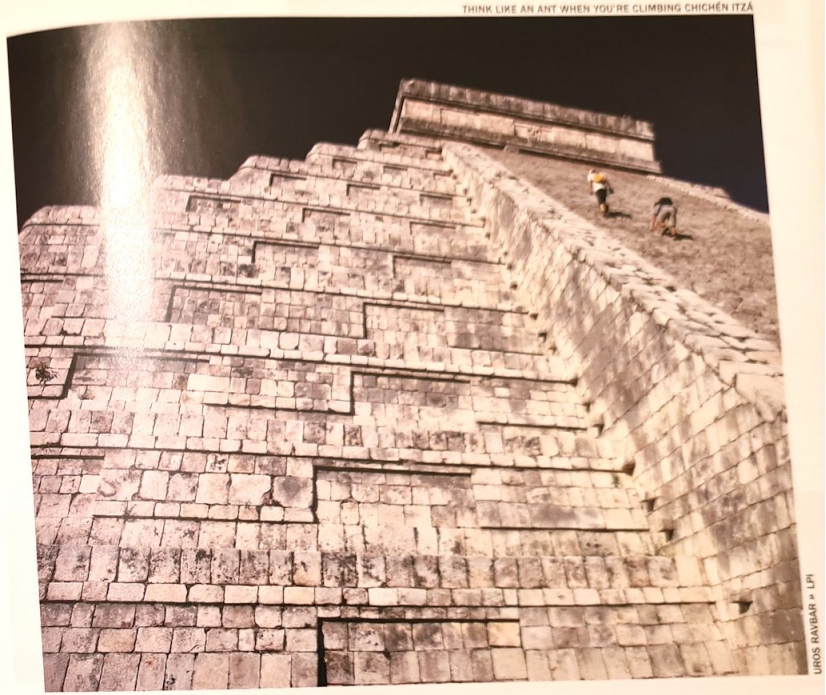
WHAT'S NOT...

Bumpy 'chicken bus' rides in Guatemala. Hurricanes and eating Big Macs in Cancún.

RANDOM FACTS

- An estimated seven million indigenous Maya people live in Central America today, speaking over 21 different dialects.
- The temple rooftops of Tikal made a cameo appearance as the rebel base in the 1977 film *Star Wars*.
- *Popol Vuh* (the Mayan Bible) is one of the most significant Pre-Columbian American books and the name of an experimental 1970s German rock band.
- Belize (formerly British Honduras) is the only country in Central America where English is the official language.

THINK LIKE AN ANT WHEN YOU'RE CLIMBING CHICHÉN ITZÁ



UROS RAYBAR © LPI

MOST BIZARRE SIGHT

In the Guatemalan highlands, grown men tackle the Palo Volador (the Flying Pole), climbing to the top of tall pine poles erected in the town plaza and swooping around midair at the end of ropes. This dizzy dance takes place during the Fiesta of Santo Tomas (21 December) and comes from the Mayan tradition of *yaxche* – a mystical tree that unites the underworld, earth and heavens.

REGIONAL FLAVOURS

You can thank the Mayans for chocolate. The ancient inhabitants of Mesoamerica were the first people to cultivate cacao beans for a drink called *xocolatl*, which they mixed with chilli peppers. Today, Guatemalans still have a sweet tooth and the *flan de naranja* (orange flan) can be a dessert or served with eggs and tortilla at breakfast.

BEST PLACES TO FIND MIDDLE EARTH

PACK YOUR BAGGINS AND LOOK OUT FOR HOBBITS, ELVES AND DWARVES IN PLACES OUT OF JRR TOLKIEN'S FICTIONAL WORLD.

01 PACAYA, GUATEMALA

Probably way off Tolkien's radar, the Pacaya volcano in Guatemala does have some similar features to Mount Doom in Mordor. Pacaya first erupted some 23,000 years ago and has been continuously pumping out sulphuric gas since 1965. Easily reached by bus from the nearby city of Antigua, Pacaya is a popular two-hour climb to the top. The panoramic views above the clouds are astonishing and you can almost ski your way down on the ash.

The Vila Flor Hotel (www.vilaflorhotel.com) in nearby Antigua offers tours to the volcanoes and a fine cup of locally grown Guatemalan coffee.

02 PENDLE HILL, ENGLAND

It is thought that Tolkien found his inspiration for hobbits in the woods of the Ribble Valley. This mystical part of Lancashire is dominated by Pendle Hill, a dark shape isolated from the Pennines like the fictional Lonely Mountain. The names of places here have a fairy-tale feel – the Forest of Bowland, the River Ribble and Wolfhole Crag – to name just a few. Pendle is also famous for its medieval witchcraft, and hikers can walk along the Pendle Witches Trail. But it's not all black magic – George Fox, founder of the Quakers, was also spellbound by the hill.

Pendle Hill is best reached from the village of Barley. For information on hiking and biking tours see www.visitlancashire.com.

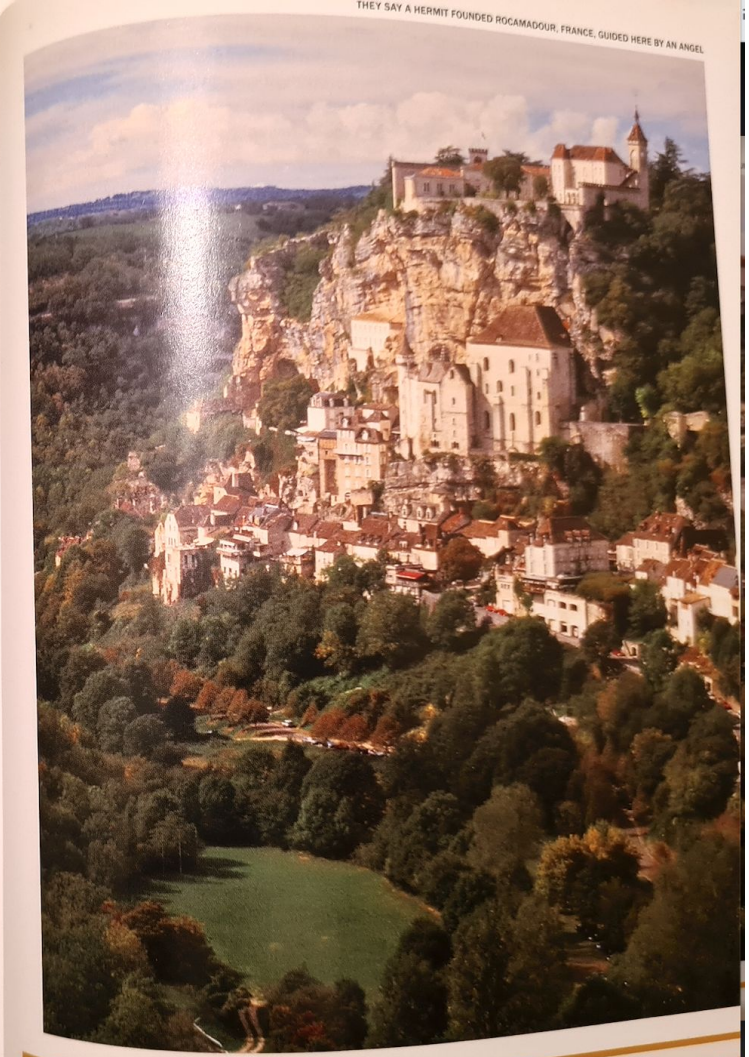
03 ROCAMADOUR, FRANCE

Uncannily similar to the fictional 'White City' of Minas Tirith in Gondor, scene of the pivotal Battle of the Pelennor Fields, Rocamadour rises from the scraggly limestone cliffs overlooking a deep gorge alongside the River Alzou. They say truth is stranger than fiction, and if local legend is to be believed then Rocamadour was founded by a hermit who was guided here by an angel. A place of Christian pilgrimage since medieval times, devotees can climb the 233 steps of the Great Staircase or take a lift to the shrine.

Rocamadour is off the A20 motorway, 100 km north of Toulouse; see www.tourisme-lot.com.

MATAMATA, NEW ZEALAND

You don't have to be a Tolkien geek to enjoy Matamata, but most people that come to this rural town on the North Island are hunting for hobbits. Matamata is home to Hobbiton, the film set of *The Lord of the Rings*. When director Peter



THEY SAY A HERMIT FOUNDED ROCAMADOUR, FRANCE, GUIDED HERE BY AN ANGEL

Jackson came across Alexander Farm, he knew he'd found the perfect location for The Shire. After filming was completed, the government decided to keep the hobbit holes, though visitors today are more likely to see grazing sheep rather than characters like Frodo, Merry and Pippin – never mind the dreaded Nazgûl.

Alexander Farm is located on Buckland Rd, Matamata. Tours run from Auckland, Tauranga and Hamilton; see www.hobbitontours.com.

✪ GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS, USA

They don't call them the Smokies for nothing. This giant mountain range, stretching 2108km through North Carolina and Tennessee, is known for its fog – just like the Misty Mountains in Middle Earth. The Smokies were the homeland of the Cherokee tribe, the majority of whom were forced west by the *Indian Removal Act* of 1830 (or 'Trail of Tears'). Today it's the most-visited national park in the USA, offering outdoor activities including camping, fishing and horse riding.

Around 1500 black bears live in the park, as do salamanders, elk and white-tailed deer. For detailed information on wildlife and more, see www.nps.gov/grsm.

✪ STROMBOLI, ITALY

Off the northern coast of Sicily, the island of Stromboli is home to one of the most active volcanoes on earth. In fact, geologists use the term 'Strombolian' to describe violent eruptions in other countries. Not surprisingly, this fiery island is said to be the inspiration for Orodruin, the fiery mountain of Mordor, in the land of the Dark Lord Sauron. Although it has been spurting out molten rock from its lava crater without break since 1932, Stromboli is still widely visited, but only 800 (quite brave) people live there.

Minutes from the volcano and Stromboli's harbour, the Ossidiana Hotel (www.hotelossidiana.it) is for those wanting to be close to the action.

✪ DRAKENSBERG, SOUTH AFRICA

Literally translated as 'Dragon Mountain' in Dutch, Drakensberg sounds and looks like something out of folklore. An immense and remote mountainous wonderland, it is as vast as Middle Earth itself. The Zulus call Drakensberg 'uKhahlamba' ('Barrier of Spears') as it creates a natural border between Lesotho and the KwaZulu-Natal region. Lodges and base camps are scattered across this UNESCO World Heritage site, home to over 290 species of birds and 48 species of mammals.

The only way to reach Drakensberg is via the Sani Pass, which is some 3000m high at its peak. For maps and more, see www.kzn.org.za.

✪ STIRLING CASTLE, SCOTLAND

Sitting atop a hill of solid volcanic rock that was forced up from deep within the earth millions of years ago, Stirling Castle has been notoriously difficult to attack. Like Tolkien's Helm's Deep (site of the Battle of the Hornburg), Stirling is set in a strong naturally defensive position, a good spot to shoot arrows at invading Orcs (or, for preference, Englishmen). A symbol of Scottish pride, the castle has witnessed the victories of William Wallace and Robert the Bruce, though most of the buildings at Stirling today date from the 15th and 16th centuries.

Stirling Castle opens from 9am to 5pm in winter and 9am to 6pm in summer; find more at www.stirlingcastle.gov.uk.

✪ REDWOOD NATIONAL PARK, USA

OK, the trees found in Redwood National Park in California can't walk or talk like the Ents of the deadly fictional forests of Mirkwood and Fangorn, but they are the tallest specimens in the world. Aside from trees, Redwood also has crystal-clear streams, prairies and 64km of wild coastline. The coastal redwood trees generally live for 500 to 700 years and a few are said to be 2000 years old, making them some of the oldest living things on earth (apart from wizards, of course).

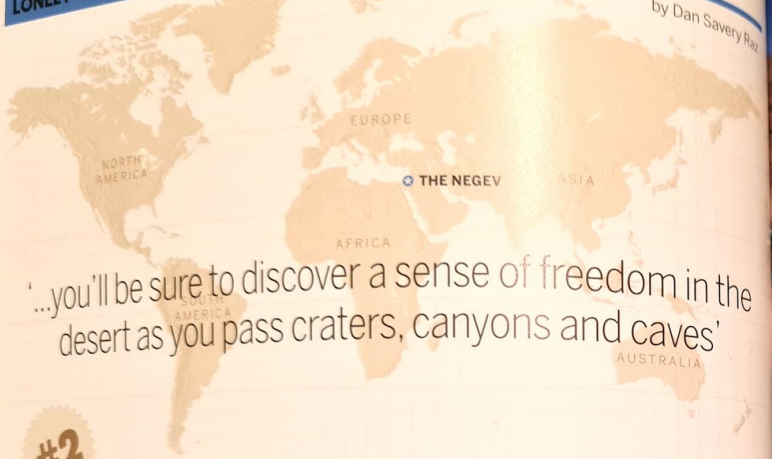
Redwood National Park has five information centres open daily from 9am to 6pm (summer), 9am to 5pm (spring) and 9am to 4pm (winter). For details go to www.nps.gov/redw.

✪ LAUTERBRUNNEN VALLEY, SWITZERLAND

You don't need to stretch your imagination too far to pretend that this corner of Switzerland is actually Rivendell, the realm of the Elves and site of the Council of Elrond, where Frodo accepted his fate as Ring-bearer. Tolkien actually travelled here in 1919 and his painting of Rivendell looks much like Lauterbrunnen, with its deep, lush valley with waterfalls set against the backdrop of snowy mountains. Located in the canton of Bern, the valley is dotted with villages such as Grindelwald and Wengen and is a popular spot for winter sports.

Wengen is one of the few car-free resorts in Europe and is served by the Wengernalpbahn railway. For train timetables, www.sbb.ch.

by Dan Savery Raz



'...you'll be sure to discover a sense of freedom in the desert as you pass craters, canyons and caves'

#2

ACTIVITIES | ADVENTURE | OFF-ROAD

THE NEGEV, ISRAEL

- **POPULATION** 630,000
- **MAIN TOWN** Be'er Sheva
- **LANGUAGES** Hebrew, Arabic, English
- **MAJOR INDUSTRIES** Tourism, agriculture, greentech
- **UNIT OF CURRENCY** New Israeli Shekel (NIS)
- **COST INDEX** Double/dorm room in guesthouse 450/100NIS (US$120/27), *labaneh* (yoghurt cheese) and pita bread 20NIS (US$5.30), three-hour bus ride from Be'er Sheva to Eilat 55NIS (US$14), 90-minute camel ride 135NIS (US$36)

THE RED SEA UNDERW
OBSERVATORY MA
PARK, EILAT, IS

WHY GO IN 2013? A NEW LEASE OF LIFE

For decades the Negev was regarded as nothing but a desolate desert. But today this region is a giant greenhouse of development. Think eco-villages, spa resorts and wineries. Yes, wineries.

Thanks to computerised drip irrigation, the Negev Highlands now has its own wine route. A crop of 21st-century vineyards has been springing up south of the city of Be'er Sheva, offering a taste of the Napa Valley in the Negev.

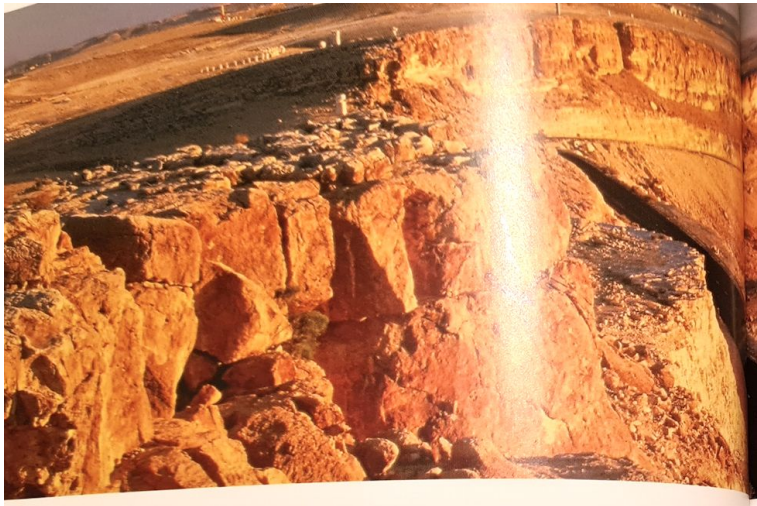
The desert also provides the perfect environment to learn about water conservation and renewable energy, both important issues in 2013. The *kibbutzim* of Sde Boker, Lotan and Ketura all offer ecological workshops and the last is hom to Israel's first solar field.

Then there's the Makhtesh Ramon cra Israel's very own Grand Canyon. Last ye the Mitzpe Ramon Visitors' Centre was reopened with a new astronomy museu and the surrounding lunar landscape is atmospheric space to do some star-gaz

But a bigger bang is coming. In the ne few years a new international airport at Timna is scheduled to open, followed b high-speed railway to Eilat and more ho Time is running out to experience the desert as nature intended.

LIFE-CHANGING EXPERIENCES

Whether you go off-road by 4WD, bicy



A ROAD SKIRTS THE R
MAKHTESH RAMON CR
NEGEV DESERT, I

on foot, you'll be sure to discover a sense of freedom in the desert as you pass craters, canyons and caves. Get a taste of the ancient spice route at the Nabataean ruins of Avdat, Shivta and Mamshit, try a spot of Watsu (water shiatsu) at Kibbutz Lotan and take a dive at the colourful Red Sea reef. Explore the galaxy by star-gazing at Makhtesh Ramon, spot a wild ibex in the Ein Avdat National Park and witness migrating birds from Africa as they pass through the Arava valley, a great highway in the sky.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

✪ Shake your money-maker as the International Belly Dance Festival comes to Eilat in January.

✪ Open your chakras with a yoga workshop at the Zorba Festival held at Ashram in the Desert, south of Mitzpe Ramon, on Passover (late March) and Sukkot (September).

✪ Cool it down after a day in the blazing desert sun at the Red Sea Jazz Festival held every August, with free outdoor jams at the Yam Suf Hotel on Eilat's Coral Beach.

WHAT'S HOT...

Solar heating, creative recycling, wine-tasting, Red Sea kite-surfing, birdwatching

...WHAT'S NOT

Nuclear testing, landfilling, water-wasting, Red Sea polluting, TV-watching

HOT TOPIC OF THE DAY

Refugees. The western Negev has become a frontline in the refugee debate. Every month more than a thousand Africans cross the Egyptian border into Israel. In 2012 the Israeli government approved a bill to build a detention centre in the Negev that could hold up to 10,000 people. The topic has split the nation, with some arguing that Israel cannot support an endless influx of people, while others believe that it has a duty to offer shelter to those fleeing persecution.

RANDOM FACTS

✪ The Negev makes up nearly 60% of Israel's landmass but is home to just 8% of the population.

✪ The ancient ruins of Avdat provided the backdrop for the 1973 film of Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical *Jesus Christ Superstar*.

✪ The Negev is home to around 160,000 Bedouin, half of whom are nomadic.

✪ The world's biggest curved solar dish (nicknamed PETAL) is at the Ben-Gurion National Solar Energy Centre in Sde Boker.

DEFINING DIFFERENCE

The Negev feels like a different planet, well away from the hustle and bustle of the rest of the country. The pace of life is so laid bac that locals call it *zaman midbar* (desert time

REGIONAL FLAVOURS

The harsh conditions of the Negev make surprisingly good terrain for mountain goat and there are a number of farms offering dairy delights. Kornmehl Farm near Sde Boker specialises in goat's-cheese platters pizzas and yoghurts. Wherever you are in the Negev, you're never far from a plate of *labaneh* – yoghurt made from cheese, usu served with *za'atar* (hyssop herb), olives a pita bread. But for a real taste of the deser try some Bedouin *maqloobeh* (upside-dov chicken and rice), followed by the tradition three cups of mint tea or black coffee.

'Fall in love with the landscape that inspired poet Robert Burns'

#3

SCOTLAND

ACTIVITIES | EVENTS | CULTURE

by Dan Savery Raz

- **POPULATION** 5.3 million
- **FOREIGN VISITORS PER YEAR** 2.35 million
- **CAPITAL** Edinburgh
- **LANGUAGES** English, Scots (Lallans), Scottish Gaelic
- **MAJOR INDUSTRIES** Energy, finance, tourism
- **UNIT OF CURRENCY** British pound (£)
- **COST INDEX** Double room in B&B £60 (US$90), haggis with neeps and tatties £11 (US$16), glass of malt whisky £3.50 (US$5.30), entry to Edinburgh Castle £16 (US$24)

WHY GO IN 2014? IT'S AN EVENTFUL YEAR

Glasgow hosts the XX Commonwealth Games in the summer of 2014. This major sporting event brings thousands of people from the 71 nations of the former British Empire to Scotland. To coincide with the Games, Glasgow has had a multimillion-pound facelift. The city has never looked so good, with new sports venues such as the Sir Chris Hoy Velodrome, improved transport links and a regeneration of Glasgow Harbour, home to the ultramodern Riverside Museum.

It is also the Year of Homecoming, a government initiative to welcome the Scottish diaspora back to the mother country by celebrating Scotland's heritage, food and drink. The phrase 'there's something for everyone' applies: Europe's biggest brass band festival blasts Perthshire and there will be an orienteering contest around Scottish castles. Local food and drink is showcased at the Spirit of Speyside Whisky Festival in May.

Despite all this, politics will take centre stage: to be or not to be independent, that is the question. This year, three centuries after the Act of Union which created the UK, the Scots finally decide. The referendum on independence is set for 18 September, and politicians will be battling to win Scottish hearts in the build-up to the big vote.

And then there are the Highland Games, the Ryder Cup at Gleneagles and Edinburgh's Festival. Hold onto your hats, Scotland...

A RED DEER STAG ROAMS G
GARRY BEFORE SGURR MO
SCOTLAND'S HIGHLA

LIFE-CHANGING EXPERIENCES

Ascend Arthur's Seat, an outstanding grassy peak in Holyrood Park, for panoramic views of Castle Rock looming over Edinburgh – the most gothic city outside Transylvania. Stop for a wee whisky and some fine dining at the Witchery on the Royal Mile before delving into the city's dungeons. Then take the high road to Loch Lomond, Loch Ness and Cairngorms National Park and fall in love with the landscape that inspired poet Robert Burns.

RECENT FAD

Wind farms. Scotland's fastest-growing renewable energy is wind power. By 2020 Scotland aims to generate all of its electricity from renewables, and huge wind farms can be found in Whitelee, Forth and South Ayrshire, with more planned offshore. But not everyone loves these turbines. Donald Trump opposed an offshore wind farm in Aberdeen claiming it would spoil the sea views for golfers at his resort. But he couldn't stop the winds of change.

HOT TOPIC OF THE DAY

'Should Scotland be an independent country?' This question, which will be put to Scots in the autumn, has divided opinion. Scotland has had its own parliament since it devolved in 1999. Alex Salmond, First Minister and leader of the SNP (Scottish National Party), has turned himself into a modern-day William Wallace by calling for independence and whipping up nationalist pride. Yet opposition leaders say Scotland is 'on pause', and Prime Minister David Cameron argues that its military, finance and trade are stronger within the UK.

Festivals & Events

- Musicians from all over the world jam and jig into the wee hours at Celtic Connections, Glasgow's annual folk, roots and world-music festival held in January and February.
- Knights in shining armour are brought to life in a hi-tech, 3D battle at the site of the Battle of Bannockburn, south of Stirling Castle, on 28 and 30 June 2014. The event marks the 700th anniversary of Robert the Bruce's defeat of the English.
- The hunt for gold and glory comes to Glasgow (23 July to 3 August) for the XX Commonwealth Games.
- The good, the bad and the underworld of music, comedy and theatre invade the capital throughout August for the annual Edinburgh International Festival and its rowdy Fringe.

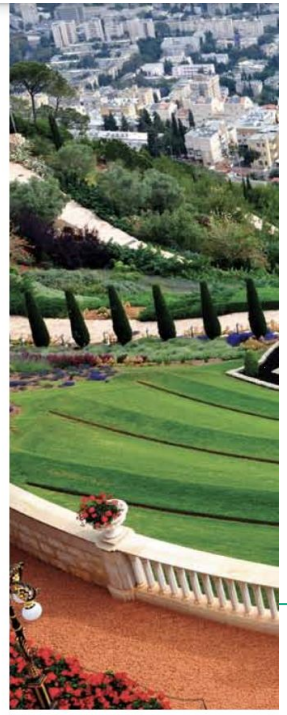
RANDOM FACTS

- The real King Macbeth (whom Shakespeare called the 'Thane of Glamis') did not actually reside at Glamis Castle in Angus, although this is part of the new Macbeth Trail.
- Glen Coe, a spectacular Highland valley, is a film star itself, providing backdrops for *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, *Braveheart* and the third Harry Potter film.
- At 1344m above sea level, Ben Nev (possible translations of the Gaelic include 'venomous', 'dreadful', 'cloudy 'heavenly' mountain – take your pick) the highest point in the British Isles ar is a 400-million-year-old, highly erode collapsed volcano.
- The original kilt was a full-length w garment that dates back to the 16th century. Supposedly, it was an Englis who invented the skirt-like 'walking ki
- Scottish whisky can be made from malted barley or malted barley with o grains added. The highest form of wh a malt whisky from a single distillery: single malts can be aged 30 years or Find out more on the Speyside Malt W Trail and pause at a distillery for a tas

COX & KINGS

ISRAEL

Dan Savery Raz, author of *Lonely Planet's Israel & the Palestinian Territories*, samples the sweet taste of Haifa and the Carmel Mountains in Israel



For many, Israel means the Holy City of Jerusalem, the mud spas of the Dead Sea or biblical Bethlehem. Yet, away from the stereotypes and global headlines, there is so much more to this tiny, diverse country. And Haifa - Israel's third largest city - makes a surprisingly relaxing base from which to explore the rustic north's world-class wineries, art galleries and national parks.

Just over an hour north by car or train from Tel Aviv airport, Haifa emerges from the forest hills of Mount Carmel, framed by the glistening Mediterranean Sea. Often overshadowed by Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, Haifa is an extraordinary city in its own right: an industrial, medical and technological hub, that's also home to a wealth of museums, temples and hillside havens.

> "Haifa emerges from the forest hills of Mount Carmel, framed by the glistening Mediterranean Sea."

Haifa's port, the biggest and busiest in the country, is the gateway for Israel's commerce. But it wasn't always this way. Historically, nearby Akko was favoured over Haifa as the main port, for almost two thousand years. When the Crusaders conquered in 1100 AD, Haifa became an important town, but it later fell to pirates and degenerated during the Mameluke and Ottoman periods. In the 1920s, British engineer Sir Frederick Palmer stated that Haifa's deep waters and natural secluded bay made it the perfect place for large industrial shipping and the port was officially opened in 1933. The city hasn't looked back since.

Today, Haifa has come to symbolize modern multiculturalism: religious and secular Jews, Christians, Muslims and Druze Arabs intermingle on Haifa's streets. Perhaps, the most visible sign of this cultural mix is Wadi Nisnas, a bustling marketplace where Hanukkah, Christmas and Ramadan are celebrated together.

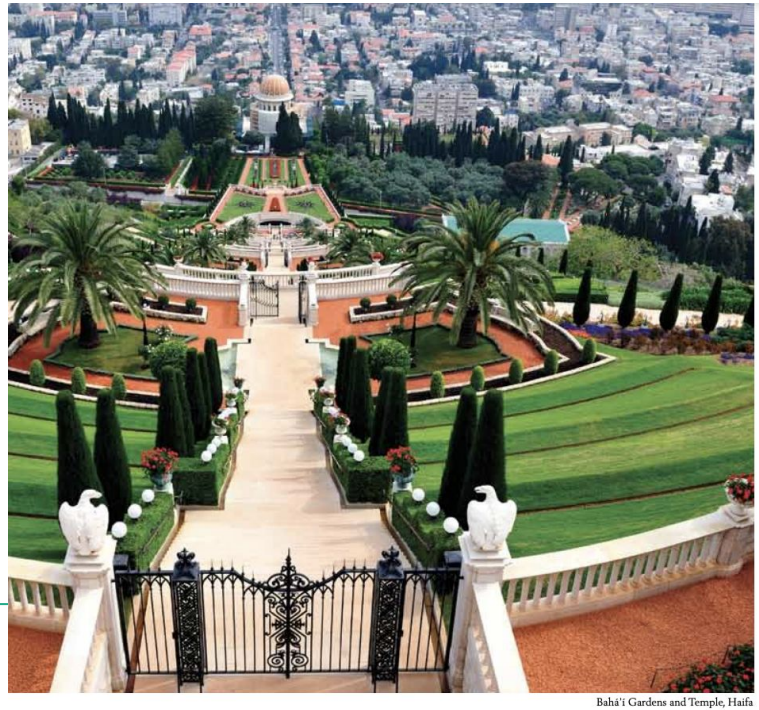
No visit to Haifa is complete without a trip to the Bahá'í Gardens and Temple. One of the most beautiful gardens in the world, Bahá'í is as close as Israel gets to Eden. With over half a million visitors a year, the Bahá'í Gardens - a one km staircase of nineteen terraces, gently scaling the northern slope of Mount Carmel - is one of the most popular sites in the Middle East. The golden-domed Shrine of the Báb, a glorious temple built with Italian stone and Dutch tiles in the 1950's, sits in the middle of the gardens and dominates from every angle.

The Shrine marks the resting place of Báb (meaning 'gate'), the spiritual founder of the Bahá'í Faith, who was executed in Persia in 1850 for his 'heretical' teachings. The Bahá'í Faith, one of the world's youngest religions, is based on the unity of humanity and comes from the Arabic word baha ('glory'). Bahá'í now has over six million followers worldwide, but people from all faiths make the pilgrimage up the 1,700 steps, past cascading fountains, to the Shrine.

Another popular pilgrimage is to Elijah's Cave, a small domed chapel on the slopes of Mount Carmel, where it is said that the Prophet Elijah lived and taught. The cave is situated below the Stella Maris Carmelite Monastery, with its exquisite Basilica and painted ceiling depicting the chariots of fire ascending into heaven. The Monastery can be reached by climbing the slopes by foot or taking the free cable car.

Directly below the cascading Bahá'í Gardens lies the 'German Colony', a string of boutique shops, cafés and restaurants lining the promenade of Ben-Gurion Boulevard. For a touch of the Far East in the Middle East, visit the Tikotin Museum of Japanese Art, next to the Dan Carmel Hotel. The museum, founded by Felix Tikotin in 1957, is dedicated to purely Japanese art and exhibits everything from 14th-century Buddhist scrolls to pottery, metal work and new animation.

After a long day of sight-seeing, the Carmel Forest Spa Resort - Israel's largest luxury spa - is the perfect place to recuperate. Set in 15 acres of private woodland around 20 minutes' drive from the downtown Haifa, this secluded resort offers dozens of health and beauty treatments, yoga workshops and gourmet cuisine. Alternatively Villa Carmel, undoubtedly Haifa's most prestigious hotel, is within walking distance of the city centre. Originally built in the 1940's (and recently renovated), the Villa was the hotel of choice for Haifa's aristocracy, and Israel's first Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion.



Bahá'í Gardens and Temple, Haifa

Haifa is ideally situated for day trips around the north of Israel. 15 km south of the city is Daliyat al-Karmel, the largest Druze village in Israel. The Druze - a separatist Arabic community living in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Israel - began life as an off-shoot of Islam and are widely considered to be a peaceful people. The main street in Daliyat al-Karmel is lined with shops selling Arabian rugs, jewellery and also serves some of the best houmous in the region.

It's worth taking a short detour to the hill-side artist settlement of Ein Hod, which was founded in 1950 by the Dadaist painter Marcel Janco, and is home to the Janco-Dada Museum. This picturesque village is an art-lover's paradise, and you can buy unique pieces straight from a studio or simply stroll around the numerous small galleries.

> "One of the most beautiful gardens in the world, Bahá'í is as close as Israel gets to Eden…"

Israel's best-known wineries can be found 35 km south of Haifa in the quaint hilltop town of Zichron Ya'akov, founded in 1882 by a small group of immigrants from Romania led by the Rothschild family. The name Zichron Ya'akov (meaning Jacob's Memorial) was given by Baron Edmond James de Rothschild in memory of his late father. Today, Zichron still exudes an air of extravagance, its upscale villas resplendent in the southern Carmel hillside.

The original Carmel Winery was built in 1882 and continues to make award-winning wine in Zichron. The largest winery in Israel in terms of grapes received at harvest, Carmel produces 15 million bottles a year

Dor beach, Israel

Stella Maris Carmelite Monastery, Israel

Zichron, Israel

National park, Caesarea

Carmel Forest Spa Resort

as well as unique blends of olive oil. The newly opened Carmel Wine & Culture Centre includes a wine shop, bistro, and two specialist tasting rooms, as well as running wine workshops in the Rothschild's underground cellars.

Further down Zichron's main pedestrian street, the Tishbi Cafe has an outdoor terrace, where wine enthusiasts can sample the range of aromatic, fruity wines (bring a bottle and have it refilled with the excellent house wine). The Tishbi Cafe also sells delicious wine jams such as 'Cherry Shiraz' and 'Strawberry Merlot' made at its winery just out of town.

Opposite the Tishbi Cafe, the Aaronsohn NILI Museum houses a collection of exotic plants. This small but nonetheless fascinating museum also tells the story of NILI, the resistance movement who fought alongside the British against the Ottoman Empire during World War I.

Despite its turbulent history, Zichron is now one of the most serene spots in Israel. The sound of wind chimes and the occasional flamenco guitarist coming from a cafe balcony fill the town an almost dreamlike quality. And there is no shortage of places to dine. HaNeshika ('The Kiss') is a gorgeous bakery cum restaurant in a converted old country farmhouse and courtyard. Dishes include saddle of lamb on a bed of Jerusalem artichokes and lentils, breast of pork and pork stew of shoulder. For strictly kosher dining, the newly-opened Besarim restaurant - which started life as a butchers - offers gourmet meat and fish dishes, and wonderful sea views.

Immediately beneath Zichron are the glorious sands of Nahsholim and Dor, widely regarded as two of Israel's best beaches. The idyllic Dor Beach is set on a quiet bay near the ruins of an ancient harbour, where fishing boats bob on the waves and small islands are only a short wade away. The neighbouring Habonim Nature Reserve makes for a delightfully scenic, coastal walk, and is a bird-spotters delight amongst the sand dunes and protected rocky coves.

> "Elijah's Cave - with its exquisite Basilica and painted ceiling depicting the chariots of fire ascending into heaven"

A ten-minute drive south of Zichron leads to the Roman ruins of Caesarea. This impressive national park houses the well-preserved ruins of a harbour settlement: its labyrinthine white fortress walls, arches and giant pillars are complemented by the deep blue of the Mediterranean Sea. Named after Augustus Caesar, this large port city was built by Herod around 30 BC and eventually became the headquarters of Roman Palestine. The most outstanding site at Caesarea is the huge U-shaped Herodian amphitheatre, traditionally used for chariot races, gladiatorial and animal combats to the delight of some 10,000 spectators. These days the ancient theatre plays host to less gruesome events, including classical music concerts and a lively jazz festival.

Round off your day at the Somek Winery in Zichron. Owned by the Dahan family, Somek - meaning blush - uses old-growth vines dating back to 1892, to produce rich, highly-prized reds, such as their classic Carignan. The hills are studded with boutique wineries; their terraces offering panoramic views of the rolling Carmel valley, out to the glistening Mediterranean coastline beyond. Looking out to the sea, gently nursing a glass of Carmel Vintage, time falls away as you fall under the spell this corner of the world has been casting ever since the ancient Greeks and Romans first came ashore.

ISRAEL FACT BOX

Location: The Levant area of the Middle East, bordering the Mediterranean Sea, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and Egypt
Population: 7.5 million
Languages: Hebrew, Arabic & English
Time: GMT + 2 hours
Money: Israeli Shekel (NIS or ILS) currently 5.82 to £1

When to go: Spring and autumn are the best times for sightseeing.

Where to stay: There's a range of luxury hotels in Jerusalem. The King David Jerusalem Hotel, is one of Israel's most famous, steeped in history and bursting with character. Alternatively, the Mamilla Hotel is one of the city's newest and most stylish places to stay.

What not to miss: Visit King Herod's mountain palace at Masada.

Best meal: Tel Aviv's colourful farmers' market each Friday, is full of tasty local produce and pastries.

Insider tip: Tel Aviv, also known as the 'white city', has been designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site for its large number of Bauhaus style buildings.

Best Cox & Kings tour: 8 day escorted group tour *Israel: A Journey to Jerusalem* priced from £1,995 per person. Includes international flights, accommodation, varied meal plan, fully escorted tour. Price based on 2 people sharing.

For more information about Israel, visit www.thinkisrael.com

At the time of going to print, the Mount Carmel region was affected by wildfires. Check with Cox & Kings for latest updates.

EASYJET TRAVELLER

BOOM BOOM POW

WORDS DAN SAVERY RAZ | PHOTOS NITZAN HAFNER

TEL AVIV IS MOVING

AND SHAKING TO A NEW UNDERGROUND SOUND THAT BEGAN A LONG, LONG TIME AGO IN AFRICA

AS THE SUN GOES DOWN

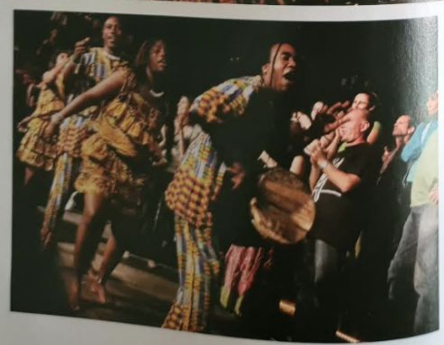
in Tel Aviv, a hypnotic tribal beat can be heard coming from a beach near Jaffa. Known to locals as Drum Beach, it's the meeting point for the drummers and dancers who make up a distinctly African music scene, one that is fast becoming part of Tel Aviv's nightlife. Every Friday, the beach attracts all kinds of revellers, from beach bums to businessmen, suntanned locals to sunburnt tourists.

They come to hear sounds not traditionally associated with Tel Aviv, which is better known for its colourful trance and gay nightclubs. But in many ways, Tel Aviv, or TLV, is now opening its arms to Africa. Inspired by their travels and the growing Ethiopian immigrant population, Israelis have welcomed a unique "world music" scene, with its roots running much deeper than the realms of Peter Gabriel, Paul Simon's *Graceland* album, and hippiedom.

IT BEGAN, AS they say, in Africa – Ethiopia to be precise. The story of the Ethiopian Jewish community is an epic tale of biblical proportions. The origin of Ethiopian Jews (or Falasha Mura) is unclear, but some believe they were descendents of the lost Israelite tribe of Dan. Although small groups of African Jews returned to Israel in the 1950s, the majority arrived during Operation Moses from Sudanese refugee camps in 1984 and Operation Solomon in 1991. Almost the entire Falasha community was air-lifted to safety in order to escape civil war and famine. Operation Solomon set a world record for a single-flight passenger load when 1,122 refugees were squeezed onto one aircraft and in just 36 hours almost 14,500 Ethiopians were airlifted in 34 flights.

In recent years, these immigrants have started to find their voice in Israel. The clearest example of this cultural development is the Idan Raichel Project (*idanraichelproject.com*), a group that fuses Middle Eastern and Ethiopian music. With his long black dreadlocks and turban, Idan is one of Israel's most recognisable musicians. "If you know nothing about Ethiopia, you might think it's just a bunch of huts in villages," says Idan. "So it's important for people to see Ethiopian musicians onstage." >

THE ROOTS AND WORDS IN AFROBEAT SEEM TO RESONATE IN TEL AVIV



Clockwise from here, at an evening organised by African drumming school TAMTAM Kabako, who are inspired by the music of Burkina Faso; Nokoba dance troupe; popular drummer Thomas Guei with Kabako; previous spread Nokoba

FIVE REASONS TO LOVE TLV

TRIBAL VIBES
Going strong since 1994, the Barby is one of the coolest clubs in downtown Tel Aviv. Next door to an old kibbutz city, it attracts a young bohemian crowd bobbing to Afrobeat and Rasta rhythms. *52 Kibbutz Galuyot Street, barby.co.il*

BLOCK PARTY
Opened last year, the Block was an instant hit on the TLV nightlife scene. Now a buzzing nightclub with lasers, chill-out areas and three bars, big-name guest DJs spin anything from tribal house to Motown. *35 David Chachamki Street, block-club.com*

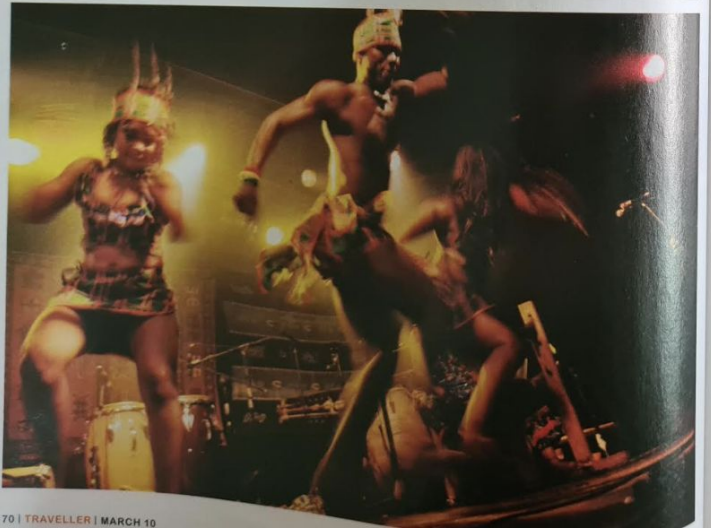
STOMPING STAGESHOW (PICTURED)
Mayumana is Israel's version of *Stomp* and fuses a world of music and dance. *Mayumana House, 15 Louis Pasteur Street, Jaffa, mayumana.com*

BEATS ON THE BEACH
Drum Beach is the best way to start the weekend every Friday evening. Feel free to join in the mayhem outside the old Dolphinarium nightclub on Tel Aviv's seafront, or simply watch the sunset with a beer. *drumbeach.co.il*

LAIDBACK AND LIVE
For a more chilled-out and sophisticated atmosphere, head to Shablul Jazz Club on Tel Aviv's port, featuring live fusion and jazz from Israeli and international musicians. *Hangar 13, Tel Aviv Port, shabluljazz.com*

"IT'S IMPORTANT FOR PEOPLE TO SEE ETHIOPIAN MUSICIANS ONSTAGE"

Here, Tha… captures the … with his … drumming … Nokoba dan… was found… Israeli-Ghana…



IN 2006 THE group performed at the Ethiopian Music Festival in Addis Ababa. It has been said that Idan's music crosses cultural borders, but he downplays this: "I just love playing music with my friends."

Today, other Israeli musicians are making African-inspired music. In the underground scene, some bands are swapping electric guitars and synthesizers for ancient wood and wind instruments like the *n'goni* (African harp) and the *balafon* (African xylophone). It's almost the complete reverse of Bob Dylan's notorious decision to "go electric" in 1965.

Israeli bands like Kabako, who were inspired by the native music of Burkina Faso in West Africa, and percussion band Tribal Dance, represent a new sound that some are calling "organic music". That is, music not produced on a computer.

If you listen carefully, the sound of Africa can be heard in bars and clubs across the city. The Block (*35 David Hachami Street*), a popular nightclub in Tel Aviv, runs African-themed nights and if you don't mind your hands aching, you can learn how to play the *djembe* at one of its drumming workshops.

THE BLOCK OFTEN invites African drumming masters like Thomas Guei to play and last year the club arranged a special night called Journey to Africa – a tribute to the music of Fela Kuti. The name Fela Kuti may not be as recognisable as Bob Marley or James Brown, but in the 70s he was a living legend in Africa. If James Brown was the Godfather of Soul, then Fela was the Godfather of Afrobeat – funky, fast and furious music.

"For me, it all started with Fela Kuti," says Israeli DJ Yano, who specialises in Afrobeat and reggae. "Afrobeat is powerful music and [he] used to have 25 people onstage, including trumpeters, guitarists, singers and percussionists."

"Ten years ago I used to go to music shops like Krembo (*13 Sheinkin Street*) in Tel Aviv with my friends and we'd celebrate every time we found an Afrobeat record," he laughs. "Now my kids laugh at me because they can get it all instantly from the internet."

DJ Yano, who has his own radio show on 106FM, says African music has deep connections to Israel. "You can find it in other countries too, but the roots and words in Afrobeat seem to resonate here," he says. "It's like the music was transported to a different time and different people."

The African influence reaches further than music. Last year the city played host to the Nollywood Babylon festival of Nigerian cinema. You can also find many African art shops like Uma Jaffa (*3 Ben Tair Street, Jaffa*) and Almaz Ethiopian Workshop (*Gan Hayir Shopping Centre, Ibn Gvirol Street*). There were two recent African "ballets" produced by theatre group Bangoura (*bangoura.co.il*), held at the Suzanne Dellal Theatre in Tel Aviv's fashionable Neve Tzedek neighbourhood.

THE TRIBAL VIBE is even filtering down to weddings and Bar Mitzvahs. Nokoba (*nokoba.com*), an African drumming and dance troupe based in Israel can be hired to liven up family occasions and is proving popular. Nokoba was founded last year by Israeli-Ghanaian couple Benjamin and Maital Koulebo.

Maital believes the reasons for this tribal revival are simple: "It brings happiness to people and gives them a chance to let it all out. It connects [people] by doing something ancient – communicating and celebrating through the drum.

"Sometimes we play to people who can't speak English and our guys can't speak Hebrew, so with music we find a common language where no translation is needed," she adds. "If you have it in you, it's easy."

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TIME OUT ISRAEL

Southern comfort

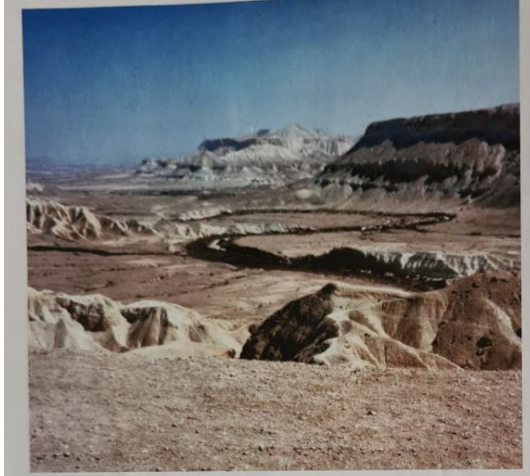
Israel's vast, southern sandy expanse, stretching from Be'er Sheva to Eilat, is often viewed only through the windows of a fast moving bus or airplane. However, the picturesque area offers much more than your average fly-over state. **Dan Savery Raz** wanders through the forgotten sands of the Negev Desert

There are people who think of the Negev as nothing more than Israel's dusty backyard, a wilderness between Be'er Sheva and Eilat. Yet, this mysterious and enchanting desert encompasses over 60 percent of Israel's landmass and is home to some of its best-kept secrets. From prehistoric craters to desert camel treks, beautiful Bedouin tents to fluffy llamas – the Negev is a wonderful adventure waiting to happen.

Hiking the highlands

Israel's first Prime Minister, David Ben Gurion, strongly believed that the country's future success depended on the development of the Negev. **Sde Boker** ("Cowboy Field", in Hebrew) is the kibbutz famous for being his desert home. Today, visitors can explore Ben-Gurion's excellently preserved, humble old house – filled with books, photographs and an exhibition about his life. Nearby, **Midreshet Ben-Gurion** (08-6532801, www.boker.org.il), founded in 1963, is a desert ecology study and research center, located directly in front of the the final resting place of Ben-Gurion and his wife Paula, overlooking the awesomely picturesque Zin Canyon.

Winding its way into the Negev highlands, Zin Canyon makes a great base for hiking trails. One of the best hikes is **Ein Avdat** (08-



Eilat's Red Mountains

Thanks to the Great Syrian-African Rift, which begins in the Arava Valley, Eilat is surrounded by magnificent mountains and gorgeous hiking trails. Here are some of the best treks in the area

Shehoret Canyon ("Black Canyon", in Hebrew) takes around three to four hours to hike and begins around 20 kilometers north of Eilat on the Route 90 Arava Road. From here you can also trek to the Amram Pillars, an impressive series of red rock columns.

The Red Canyon lies further north off Route 12, towards Ovda airport. It is just one to three meters wide and 20 meters deep. The hike takes one and a half hours and requires climbing.

Just 10 kilometers outside of Eilat, Ein Netafim is a beautiful natural spring with a small watering hole that attracts wildlife.

Popular with city slickers from Tel Aviv looking to chill out Bedouin-style, Camel Riders (08-6373218, www.camel-riders.com) is a desert retreat offering camel treks along the Shaharut cliffs and beyond, as well as drumming and flute workshops.

The Mount Zefahot trail starts just two kilometers inland from Eilat's Coral Beach, in Shlomo Canyon. From its summit, on a clear day, you can see the four nations that meet at the Red Sea – Israel, Jordan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

For information on these treks and more contact the SPNI Field School at Eilat Coral Beach (08-6371127)

6555684. NIS 23/adult, NIS 12/child. 8:00-17:00, www.parks.org.il), a gorgeous freshwater spring in the middle of the desert. The entrance to Ein Avdat is located next to the Midreshet. There are two main trails: the shorter one lasts one and a half hours and the longer one, which involves climbing up some steep steps cut into a cliff, takes around three hours.

A lesser-known hiking trail goes to **Ein Akev**, another natural spring. This six-hour trek, starting from the Midreshet, and traveling along the dried-up Zin River Basin requires plenty of hats, sunscreen and water, especially in the summer heat. In the winter, after it rains, the mountains around Zin Canyon become awash with spectacular temporary waterfalls.

Continuing further south on Route 40, **Avdat** (08-6551511. NIS 23/adult, NIS 12/child. 8:00-17:00, www.parks.org.il) is a stunning, ancient **Nabatean city** perched on a hill. Named after king Oboda, the city was founded in the third century BCE and was an important station on the incense trail that stretched from India to Rome via the Arabian Peninsula. The well-kept ruins include a Byzantine fortress, church and house, plus a Roman burial cave and bath. The Nabateans were nomads who pioneered ancient irrigation and even cultivated grapes for wine.

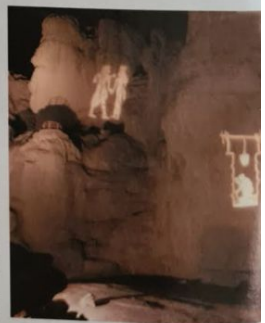
These days, the Negev has once again become a wine-growing region and visitors can sample quality, barrel-aged red Merlots and Cabernet Sauvignons at the **Sde Boker Winery** (050-7579212, www.sde-boker.org.il/winery). If you're passing by, be sure to call ahead to book a personalized wine tasting appointment.

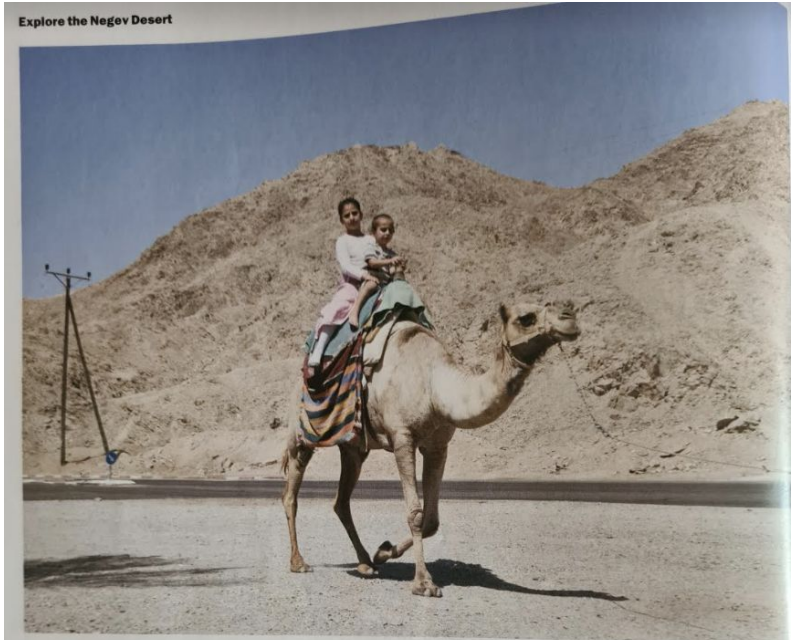
Moonwalks in Mitzpe

The Dead Sea, Red Sea and Galilee may be internationally famous, but the **Ramon Crater** is one of Israel's biggest secrets and is fast becoming a major adventure destination. Once an ancient sea, the "maktesh" is a huge crater boasting unusual natural phenomena spanning millions of years of evolution. The crater's breathtaking lunar landscape is reminiscent of the Grand Canyon and makes a great spot for stargazing.

The crater is accessible from **Mitzpe Ramon**, a small town located on its edge. Because of its elevation, Mitzpe Ramon is actually one of the coldest places in Israel, at night, but scorchingly hot during the day. The first point of call for most travellers is the **Visitors Center** (08-6588754. NIS 25/adult, NIS 13/child. Sat-Thu 8:00-16:00. Fri 8:00-15:00), housing an exhibition on the geology and history of the crater. Near the Visitors Center is **Bio Ramon** (08-6588755. NIS 12/adult, NIS 6/child. Sat-Thu 8:00-17:00), a great place for the whole family to learn about the Negev's flora, fauna and wildlife. Here, visitors will meet snakes, scorpions, turtles and other desert inhabitants. There are spectacular lookout points along the ridge of the crater where you can take awesome photographs and check out the free **Desert Sculpture Park**, designed by artist, Ezra Orion.

Be sure not to miss **Alpaca Farm** (08-6588047, www.alpaca.co.il, NIS 25/adult, NIS





23/child, 8:30-18:30), tucked into a hidden valley down a dirt track at the end of Ben-Gurion Boulevard. The farm is home to over 400 cute llamas and alpacas from the South American Andes, now the biggest herd in the world. Owners Ilan and Na'ama Dvir began this experimental desert farm in 1991 and now also offer a range of horse and pony rides in the Negev.

In recent years, Mitzpe Ramon's industrial zone has been transformed into a funky tourist destination. **Guide Horizon** (27 Har Boker St, 08-6595333, www.guidehorizon.com,) runs exhilarating buggy and 4x4 tours of the crater and also provides a relaxing spa in their converted hangar, so you can cool down after a hot day of action. For those who like to enjoy life on two wheels, **Ibike** (4 Har Ardon St, 052-4367878, www.ibike.co.il,) has everything a desert cyclist could need and offers guided biking tours.

If you are looking for an authentic Bedouin tent, then **Be'erot Campground** (08-6586713, www.beerot.com) is the only place to sleep in the middle of the crater. Located 10 kilometers south of Mitzpe Ramon, the camp acts as a tour base from which you can set off on a one-hour hike to Sharonim Spring or the all-day hike to Mount Ardon.

Rock of ages

Heading further south towards Eilat on Route 90, **Timna Park** (08-6316756, www.timna-park.co.il. NIS 69/adult, NIS 59/child. Mon-Thu 8:00-16:30, Fri, Sun 8:00-13:00) is home to the oldest copper mines on earth. Copper mining in Timna began more than 6,000 years ago and this gigantic red rock site is associated with the Egyptian Pharaohs, Set I and Ramses. The park offers visitors a geological window into the ancient world. Unique rock formations here include Solomon's Pillars, Spiral Hill and the Mushroom – a huge red rock shaped like...a mushroom. You can also see rock drawings dating from the time of ancient Egypt. Timna Park is so big that is worth hiring a car for the day, before finishing at the lake, where the whole family can ride a paddleboat, take a short camel trek or simply fill a bottle with colored sand.

Slightly further north, **Kibbutz Lotan** (08-6356935, www.kibbutzlotan.com) is a center for eco-tourism, famous for its mud-brick houses and futuristic geodesic domes. Set on the desert plains between Israel and Jordan, Lotan is comprised of the Birdwatching Center, the Eco-Kef Park for kids and a fabulous Watsu Center. What's Watsu? It's a Japanese shiatsu massage combined with the healing powers of water. Treatments at Lotan cost NIS 210 for 50 minutes and are worth every Shekel.

The **Yotvata Hai-Bar Nature Reserve** (08-6373057, www.parks.org.il) is a must-see destination for animal lovers. The reserve was established in 1968, to reintroduce desert animals such as the gazelle, oryx and ostrich to the area. Hai-Bar also has a Predator Center (birds of prey, reptiles and a leopard) and a Night Life Room (nocturnal creatures). If you're lucky you'll catch a glimpse of an ibex, a relative of the wild goat. An ibex ("yael", in Hebrew) is distinguished by its two curly horns and is the symbol of Israel's National Parks.

Rumored to have some of the best ice-cream in Israel, **Yotvata Inn** (08-6357449, 24/7 except Fri night) makes a great pit stop on the way to or from Eilat. Outside the inn, **Red Sea Desert** (08-632 6555, www.redseadesert.com) has a helpful information desk, where you can find out about all kinds of treks in the area, including sunset horseback rides along the Jordanian-Israeli border, enjoying the mountains of Edom as they change color.

HAARETZ

The Power of Giving / House of Healing

An Israeli soldier sits outside talking on his cell phone while an Arab boy rests in his wheelchair. A young mother with her newborn baby waits for a taxi and an elderly man is pulled along on a stretcher by paramedics. It's just another day in the life of Rambam Health Care Campus (RHCC) in Haifa

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Daniel Savery
Jan. 4, 2009

www.rambam.org.il

Known worldwide for its many scientific discoveries, RHCC is much more than a hospital. It is a unique center that houses learning and healing. Not only is it the main academic faculty of medicine and the largest medical center in the north of Israel, RHCC also serves the Northern Command of the IDF. Some 75,000 people are hospitalized at RHCC each year and it acts as a referral center for over two million citizens.

And Rambam is going to get even bigger. Outside the entrance to the campus, situated on the coast at Bat Galim, huge mechanical diggers are carving out the foundations for one of the most ambitious building projects in the country. Four new hospital buildings are planned - one for children and the others for cardiovascular, cancer and emergency care. In addition, there will also be a Biomedical Discovery Tower, which will integrate medicine, science and engineering.

The man overseeing this vision is Dr. Rafael Beyar, CEO and Director General of RHCC. "It's going to be very intense," he says, speaking from his spacious office in the existing Sammy Ofer Tower. "We have never seen such major developments in the history of Rambam."

Indeed, throughout the interview, the murmur of angle grinders can be heard in the background. "We even found a beautiful Byzantine mosaic when we were digging," says Dr. Beyar, displaying the picture on his PC monitor. "There are many civilizations underneath the ground here at Rambam."

War and peace

Evidence of Haifa's medical history can be found in the hospital's reception, where exhibits such as medicine jars from the Hellenistic period are displayed. After the crusades and until the late 19th century, Eretz Israel was considered one of the most unhygienic countries in the Middle East. But during the 20th century, new services, such as Magen David Adom and health funds, raised the standard of healthcare. The Government Hospital of Haifa was inaugurated in 1938 under the British Mandate. After the founding of the State of Israel in 1948, the hospital was transferred to the Ministry of Health and renamed 'Rambam', after the great 12th century physicist and philosopher Rabbi Moshe Ben-Maimon. This year, Rambam Hospital celebrated its 70th anniversary.

Today, like the city of Haifa itself, Rambam is a place where Arabs and Jews coexist. In fact, a Muslim prayer house was opened on campus in April - the first for a government hospital in Israel - and for Sukkot, a sukkah decorated with lulav leaves was built in the canteen.

"We really believe that here we can show to the world that Jews and Arabs can live together," says Dr. Beyar. "Twenty-five percent of our staff and students come from the Arab communities. Even with the intense feelings during the last war, you could see a Muslim physician treating a wounded soldier on one side and on the other side there were Israeli physicians treating Arab casualties. We treated everybody, whoever they were."

Indeed, during the 2006 Second Lebanon War, Rambam was projected into the global media spotlight as it was struck 45 times by missiles. Operating under enormous pressure, the hospital treated 792 injured citizens and soldiers, there were 200 births between the sirens and missile attacks and 4,000 employees never missed a day of work.

Speaking at a fundraising event last May, Captain Tomer Bohadana, whose life was saved at Rambam during the war, praised the hospital staff by saying, "Soldiers have to know that there are people they can depend on. Although you don't go shoulder to shoulder with us on the battlefield, we know that you are with us."

In response to the war, a fortified underground hospital with space for 750 beds is planned. Set on four floors, it will act as a multi-storey car park during peace times, but in times of emergency the lowest floor will be used as a hospital and will be protected against chemical warfare.

"It will take two to three years to complete," says Dr. Beyar, clicking on a CGI graphic of the car park/hospital. "We hope we will not need it."

Philanthropist and global shipping magnate Sammy Ofer, 86, who grew up poor in Haifa, gave a $25 million gift to RHCC for the building of the underground hospital. Furthermore, a new Emergency and Trauma Center, an extension in front of the Sammy Ofer Tower, is currently being built and should be operating by the end of 2009.

Medical breakthroughs

Another major project is the Ruth Rappaport Children's Hospital, which is scheduled for completion in three years. Designed by internationally accomplished Tel Aviv-based architect Arad Sharon, it will encompass eight floors and 250 beds. According to Sharon, the building is intended to be playful but not infantile, to appeal to children's intuition and spontaneity. Each hospital floor will be color coded and decorated to express a theme from nature, such as the blue "Ocean Floor" and green "Forest Floor" - evoking fairy tales where children make brave journeys. The ground floor of the atrium will contain a lobby, science museum, cinema, Internet cafe and shops. The upper atrium's piazza will be paved in large red and white squares like a game board.

"My sincere hope for the hospital bearing my name is that it will care for all the children of the State of Israel without religious, ethnic or gender bias," says Ruth Rappaport, originally from Haifa, whose family also donated the current Faculty of Medicine (Technion).

The "Legacy Discovery Project at Rambam," is a donation from the Legacy Heritage Fund from New York and Jerusalem. Sometimes referred to as the Biomedical Discovery Tower, it will work with biomedical technological companies to invent and develop advanced remedies. Biomedical research is any form of experimental medicine that aims to create new treatments, devices or drugs to be used for specific diseases.

Dr. Beyar has been involved in biomedical research throughout his career. After completing a Ph.D in Biomedical Engineering, he became a cardiologist and was the Dean of the Faculty of Medicine, before becoming the CEO of RHCC.

"Many of the major discoveries in medicine are made by physicians, not scientists, who are working with real patients during the day and really thinking about how to improve the treatment," he says. "These are the ones who come up with the best ideas. They know the practice and they know the theory."

One example of a recent breakthrough at Rambam is electro-magnetic navigation of the heart, which was invented by Dr. Shlomo Ben-Haim. "He developed a new method to map the dimensions of the electro activity of the heart," Dr. Beyar explains. "It allows you to see exactly how to inject these patients with very precise ablation." In short, ablation is a procedure that destroys damaged tissue and is fast becoming the major treatment for heart disease.

"Another example is developing new imaging facilities, what we call PET/CT," Dr. Beyar adds. "It is molecular imaging and can be used to show parts of the anatomy that are related to cancer. This new invention is a real breakthrough."

"Even with the intense feelings during the last war, you could see a Muslim physician treating a wounded soldier on one side and on the other side there were Jewish physicians treating Arab casualties."

Personalized medicine

Despite all the achievements and additional knowledge, the mortality rate from cancer still remains high worldwide. "Although we have made many achievements in specific areas, such as leukemia, we didn't yet conquer the disease of cancer," says Dr. Beyar. "This is maybe because the age of the population has increased. In our centers, we put a lot of emphasis on cancer research. One of our major goals is to use genetics to be able to predict a response to therapy. This is what we call 'personalized medicine'."

Dr. Beyar believes that bio-informatics (using computers and genetics to predict diseases) will have a huge impact on the future of oncology - the branch of medicine that studies the growth of tumors. "I have no doubt that in the future we will have to screen a patient for genetics and be able to prevent cancer based on their genetic pattern," he says. In a commitment to combating cancer, a new Oncology Hospital is planned for development. There will also be a new Cardiovascular Hospital, which will be located in the future Arc Building and will encompass 24,000 square meters of space at a cost of around $35 million.

Much of the funding for these projects comes from Israeli philanthropists and Dr. Beyar thinks that this is something to be proud of. "We have many reasons to be proud of what is happening here in Israel," he says.

"Rambam creates around it a circle of hitech and medical industry that contributes to the economy, employment and pride of the people."

However, running through the heart of this ultra-modern hospital is the ancient philosophy of Maimonides. "The Rambam called for excellent medical ethics and attitudes towards the patient," says Dr. Beyar. "It is very important to keep communication with the patient at a personal level. Don't forget, with all our devices and new machines, the personal touch between the physicians, the nurses and the doctors is sometimes the most important aspect in managing diseases."

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 By Dan Savery Raz

FINANCING THE **PLANET'S PROJECTS**

From real estate and healthcare, to energy and agribusiness, international financial institutions (IFIs) offer financial assistance to projects in developing and emerging countries. We talked to leaders from the World Bank, IFC, EBRD and IIC about financing different types of projects all over the world.

By providing loans, advice and other resources to developing and transitional countries, international financial institutions (IFIs) and regional development banks are in many ways building the future. The impact of IFIs such as the World Bank, IFC, EBRD and IIC has been phenomenal, helping to shape the economic structure in countries around the globe. Whether it is funding a new airport in Costa Rica, developing a 'Silicon Valley' technology park in Russia or generating electricity from livestock in Turkey, projects are often financed by international financial institutions.

The best-known IFI, the World Bank, was formed in the aftermath of World War II at the United Nations Monetary and Financial Conference, more commonly called the Bretton Woods Conference, in July 1944. Despite its name, the World Bank – which is headquartered in Washington DC – is not a bank in the common sense of the term. It is made up of two unique development institutions owned by 187 member countries: the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) and the International Development Association (IDA).

Like all financial institutions in recent years, the World Bank had to respond fast to the global economic crisis. Mr. Wael Zakout, Sector Manager of ECA (Europe and Central Asia) at the World Bank, says, "ECA was hit hard by the global economic crisis. The World Bank has provided loans of around 20 billion dollars in the last two years to help ECA countries ride out the difficult time of the crisis. Things have improved, with positive growth returning to several countries, but recovery is fragile and much needs to be done to sustain it."

Mr. Zakout oversees environmentally and socially sustainable development in all the former Communist countries, including Russia, Serbia, Romania and Poland, but also Turkey. "We have a program of around four billion dollars in Turkey," says Mr. Zakout, speaking while on a visit to Istanbul. "This includes energy transmission and efficiency, water supply and sanitation, solid waste, disaster risk and water shed management."

The World Bank regards Turkey as a 'transitional economy,' a very broad term which also includes war-torn nations such as Iraq, which it calls the 'construction site of the century.' The term 'transitional' applies to institutional as well as economical changes, for example countries moving from highly centralized political systems to more decentralized democracies.

Farm, factory and fork

The World Bank's original goal was to fight poverty, which it set out to do with structural adjustments,

leveraged loans and capital investments. Today, the UN estimates that nearly one billion people are hungry. With the global population expected to increase by a third by 2050, is the World Bank achieving its goal?

"The world has made remarkable progress in reducing global poverty," answers Mr. Zakout. "This is due to many factors, including the progress of countries like China, India, Brazil and others. While many countries are making good progress in reducing the number of poor, poverty is still a serious challenge, especially in Africa."

"In terms of food, we made agribusiness a strategic priority about five years ago before the current food crisis," elaborates Alzbeta Klein, Global Head of Manufacturing, Chemicals and Fertilizers at the IFC (International Finance Corporation), part of the World Bank Group. "Strategically, we're looking at Africa as the next place where food will be grown. Food wastage is a big problem and we are investing in cold storage to alleviate that issue."

Agribusiness includes the production of primary commodities such as wheat, soy and maize, as well as the processing of fruit and vegetables. According to Ms. Klein, agribusiness has "three main facets – farm, factory and fork – the latter is what gets to the consumer." Critics accuse agribusiness of funding large-scale corporate farming by companies such as Monsanto, but, Klein says, "Most of our clients are local. Even our global clients are localized. For example, we have a program with ECOM in Nicaragua for the production of coffee. It's as local as it gets, even though it's a global client."

"Every project we finance has to meet IFC environmental standards," adds Klein. "Agribusiness is one of the biggest industries that has an impact on sustainability and we're always looking for new technologies, whether it's solar, wind, bio-gas or bio-fuels."

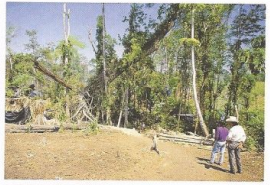
"Israeli companies are at the forefront of technology in agriculture and irrigation and I believe that they have what it takes to take sustainability to the next level," states Klein, speaking from a Tel Aviv hotel after attending a conference with Israeli corporations. The IFC's mandate is to strengthen the private sector in developing countries, particularly SMEs (small and medium enterprises). Investing in SMEs can be hugely profitable but also highly risky; therefore the

THE IFC OFFERS A RANGE OF FINANCIAL PRODUCTS, INCLUDING LOANS FROM THEIR OWN ACCOUNT, SYNDICATED LOANS ARRANGED THROUGH COMMERCIAL BANKS, SUBORDINATED DEBT, EQUITY FUNDS AND OTHER PRODUCTS.

Wind farm in Turkey financed by EBRD

Wael Zakout, World Bank: "I observe the participation of many Israeli companies in World Bank financed projects in the ECA region. This ranges from water infrastructure to transport, energy and IT systems. Israeli companies have the technical skills, strong human resources and financial backing to compete and win contracts."

Paula Alayo, IFC: "Israeli companies invest primarily in Latin America, Eastern Europe and a little bit in Africa. We worked with the five big Israeli banks – Mizrachi Tefahot, Hapoalim, Leumi, Discount and FIBI (First International Bank of Israel) – to assist emerging markets with the Global Trade Finance Program. In this program, we stepped in and basically covered the risk of Israeli banks so they could establish contact with lesser-known clients in the emerging market."



A World Bank project in Guatemala

Infrastructure development in Russia financed by the World Bank

THE INTER-AMERICAN INVESTMENT CORPORATION (IIC) PROVIDES FINANCING FOR HUNDREDS OF ENERGY PROJECTS IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN, INCLUDING CLEAN TECHNOLOGIES IN GUATEMALA AND WIND POWER IN BRAZIL

IFC looks carefully at each project. "If a project fails, we take a commercial risk," says Klein, "we either get a rebate or we don't. So we're just like any other commercial bank in that sense."

The IFC offers a range of financial products, including loans from their own account, syndicated loans arranged through commercial banks, subordinated debt, equity funds plus other products such as straight financing. At present, the IFC's biggest area of investment is East Africa, where it has invested $2.4 billion this past year (an increase from $1.6 billion). In the early 2000s, Russia – now the 12th largest economy in the world – was a major recipient of IFC investment.

Post-Communist commitment

Russia is still the most important country for the EBRD (European Bank for Reconstruction and Development). Established in 1990 in order to promote democratic values in ex-Communist countries, the EBRD is owned by 61 countries and two intergovernmental organizations. Today the EBRD finances over 320 projects from Central Europe to Central Asia.

"The EBRD is the largest investor in each of the countries of operation," says Dr. Golan Benita, Alternate Board Director at EBRD. "This gives political leverage from all the governments in the region. In such projects, the political risk is always the biggest. This could come from nationalization, corruption or difficulty providing a license connected to an activity."

Dr. Benita, now based in London, has taught finance at New York University, Bar-Ilan University and the Hebrew University. He explains that "the most important countries for EBRD operations are Russia, which represents about 35 percent of the bank's activities, followed by Turkey and Ukraine, which each take about 25 percent. In many countries, the bank is the only financier that can provide long-term loans in local currency. In Russia we are the only bank that can provide seven-year loans, and in Ukraine we are the only bank that can provide equity."

During the global economic crisis the EBRD almost doubled its business from 5 billion Euro in 2008 to over 9 billion Euro. "While other banks were pulling out of ECA countries, we were increasing our activities and providing loans," says Benita. "Our biggest project in 2010 was providing equity and loans to Greek banks that operate in our ECA countries. The Greek banks were suffering from the crisis and therefore the EBRD provided a package of 1 billion Euro."

Interestingly, Benita says, "Poland was hardly hit by the crisis because it had a very stable economy, disciplined monetary policy and developed local capital market."

The only exception to the EBRD's mandate to help exclusively ex-Communist countries is Turkey, which Benita says was due to political reasons. "By 2015 we are expecting to invest about one billion Euro in Turkey," he says. "We decided to operate in Turkey because the remote areas suffer from underdeveloped infrastructure and face difficulties in financing businesses." Benita says countries such as Turkey, as well as Kazakhstan and Ukraine, have "huge potential for developing a massive grain industry."

Clean and green energy

Another priority for EBRD, as indeed for all regional development banks, is energy efficiency. IIC (Inter-American Investment Corporation) provides financing for hundreds of energy projects in Latin America and the Caribbean, including clean technologies in Guatemala and wind power in Brazil. "One major IIC project approved this year has been a loan to WPE (Wind Power Energia S.A.), a Brazilian company which designs, produces and markets high capacity wind power equipment," says Carlos Roa, Senior Advisor of IIC's Deputy General Manager.

Founded 25 years ago, IIC's target market consists of companies with sales ranging from 5 million to 35 million dollars. To obtain financing from IIC, a company must be a profitable venture with growth potential and commit to high standards of transparency, environmental and labor practices. In October 2010, IIC held its first Sustainability Week in Costa Rica with BAC San José, where workshops covered topics such as 'Climate Change: Risks and Opportunities for the Financial Sector.' In addition, IIC's GREENPYME program aims to help mitigate climate change by promoting energy efficiency and the implementation of eco-friendly practices.

Brazil is one of the major beneficiaries of IIC financing even though it is considered as one of the newly-advanced 'BRIC' economies (Brazil, Russia, India and China). "Brazil is one of our leading countries, but has different levels of development and prosperity within the country," says Roa. "IIC is concentrating its efforts in channeling resources to the Northeast region of Brazil, which is the least developed and poorest area."

IIC is also currently processing a major fund for Haiti as it recovers from the devastating earthquake in early 2010. "IIC plans to support Haiti primarily through the proposed Haiti Social Investment Fund," Mr. Roa explains. "The fund's estimated size is 51 million Euro with reimbursable and non-reimbursable contributions from the Government of Spain (50 million Euro), and from IIC (1 million Euro)."

Other IIC projects include Coriport – a new airport passenger terminal in Costa Rica – and Hospital Alcalde, providing quality medical care at accessible prices in Mexico. "We try to focus on good projects, regardless of where they are," says Roa. "We want to provide more than financial resources; we want to be a provider of knowledge and technology." ⊙

IIC-financed agribusiness project in Mexico

Carlos Roa, IIC: "Israeli companies have provided around $13.5 million to IIC projects in Latin America since 1969. The procurement from Israel consists primarily of the purchase of equipment for the aquaculture sector but also for a wastewater treatment plant."

Dr. Golan Benita, EBRD: "The EBRD is encouraging Israeli and American companies to invest in financial services in countries like Russia, Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic. Russia could be very attractive for Israeli hi-tech companies because they are now developing a technology park to create a comfortable business environment as part of the 10 billion Euro Rusnano Fund."

TO OBTAIN FINANCING FROM IIC, A COMPANY MUST BE A PROFITABLE VENTURE WITH GROWTH POTENTIAL AND COMMIT TO HIGH STANDARDS OF TRANSPARENCY, ENVIRONMENTAL AND LABOR PRACTICES

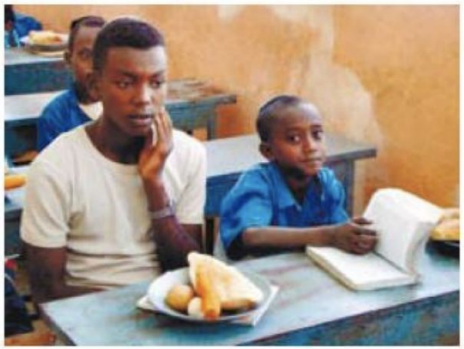
For more information on international financial institutions which finance international projects, visit the following websites: www.worldbank.org, www.ifc.org, www.ebrd.com and www.iic.int.

AN EPIC JOURNEY

The Jewish Agency for Israel has embarked on a mission to bring some 200 eligible people from Ethiopia every month to Israel over the next three years, until no one with eligibility will be left in Ethiopia ■ Dan Savery Raz

Ofer Dahan is a very busy man. As Ethiopian Project Director at the Jewish Agency for Israel (JAFI), he is overseeing a major new initiative to bring the remaining people eligible to immigrate to Israel from Ethiopia. According to a list compiled by the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry (NACOEJ) and approved by the Israeli government, there are 7,846 people left in Ethiopia eligible to immigrate to Israel. Instead of providing mass air lifts or scheduled flights in short time spans, as was done in the past, the government decided to transport the Ethiopian immigrants to Israel at a rate of 200 a month over the next three years.

The first immigrants on this program have already started to arrive. "Since January 2011, we have brought 1,120 people to Israel," says Dahan, speaking before a meeting in Beersheva, "and those who are waiting in Ethiopia are going through the process of preparing for Aliyah (immigration to Israel)." This initiative was born out of a decision made by the Israeli government in November 2010, following pressure from Ethiopians already living in Israel who gathered in Jerusalem with placards reading 'No More Discrimination' and 'Bring back Mommy and Daddy.' Although some 120,000 Ethiopian Jews live in Israel, immigration from Ethiopia ended in 2008 according to a previous government decision.



Children at the Jewish Agency's school in Gondar prepare for Aliyah

The seeds of Israel

The current group of new and future immigrants from Ethiopia, known as 'Falash Mura,' consists of Ethiopian Jews who converted to Christianity as a result of persecution or pressure. In Amharic, 'Falash Mura' means 'landless,' which is the lowest standing in Ethiopian society. Aliyah from Ethiopia has long been a controversial topic in Israel, with rabbis arguing about the legitimacy of the community's Jewish status. Some rabbis have called for all Ethiopian immigrants to undergo a 'strict conversion' or a 'return to Judaism' which includes studying the Torah, immersion in a *mikveh* (ritual bath) and appearing before a rabbinic court.

Although many Ethiopian Jews were converted to Christianity in the late 19th century, a large number kept their Judaism by praying three times a day, maintaining the sanctity of their family and studying the Torah. The Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel, Rabbi Shlomo Amar, has determined that the Falash Mura's Judaism should not be questioned any further and that therefore they must be brought to Israel. The immigration program was eventually reopened by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who said, "These are the seeds of Israel – men, women and children – that currently find themselves in the worst living conditions."

The vast majority of Ethiopian Jews arrived in Israel in the 1980s and 1990s during the now famous Operation Moses and Operation Solomon. During Operation Solomon, 14,325 Ethiopian Jews arrived in Israel in one 36-hour period in May 1991, compared to fewer than 500 people who made Aliyah from Ethiopia during the first 30 years of the State of Israel.

Ethiopia's Jewish community has traditionally resided in Gondar, a small city southwest of the Simien Mountains. "The living conditions in Gondar today are very bad," says Ofer Dahan, who previously headed the Jewish Agency delegation in South Africa. "All of them want to come to Israel." He says people live in impoverished areas in small mud houses with a lack of food and low levels of education and healthcare.

JAFI has moved all of its Ethiopian operations from the capital Addis Ababa to Gondar, where it has a dedicated Aliyah office and runs a community center that offers lessons on employment, benefits, finances and parenting in Israel. In addition, JAFI runs a Jewish state primary school in Gondar, which is attended by around 600 children from grades 1-6. The school has a library, computer room, an educational game room and, of course, includes Hebrew classes.

The absorption process

So what makes the current Ethiopian Aliyah effort different from others in the past? "Unlike *olim* (immigrants) from Ethiopia before them, the community today is very well connected," answers Dahan. "They have cell phones and can talk to their families who are already in Israel. They know what they are going to. They have expectations of life in Israel. And we ask the Ethiopians in Gondar which part of Israel they would like to live in. Usually they go to absorption centers near their existing family. For example, if they have family in Safed, they will want to be in Safed."

In many ways, it is similar to Aliyah from other countries. Most olim require help with accommodation, ulpan (Hebrew classes), employment and bureaucracy. JAFI provides the first point of help for immigrants to Israel. Ethiopian immigrants can choose to stay at one of 16 special absorption centers all over Israel, including nine in the northern Galilee region and three in Beer Sheva.

"The challenges they face in the first days in Israel are enormous," says Dahan. "When they arrive in Israel, their daily schedule is very busy. Adults spend half of the day studying and the rest of the time preparing for their independent life in Israel, while the children are in school."

There are approximately 5,500 Ethiopian immigrants living in absorption centers throughout Israel. Of these, some 2,000 children and youth are taking part in the Yesodot program. There is no kindergarten in Ethiopia, so children are often faced with a big educational gap when they join the competitive world of Israeli schools. Yesodot offers daily afternoon lessons for Ethiopian children in subjects such as Hebrew, English and mathematics, as well as sports and even Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparation.

Traditionally, the immigration process has always proved to be much more difficult for the elderly population. "Like every other community, the elderly always find it harder to move from one country to another," says Dahan. "It's the same in this case." It seems JAFI has learned much from previous waves of Aliyah and now offers programs for Ethiopian adults of all ages, plus it is planning to open a special home for the elderly.

Empowered and employed

The heart of JAFI's new strategy is to 'Inspire, Connect and Empower.' In its work in the Diaspora, JAFI aims to inspire and connect Jews to Israel in new ways, as well as continuing to empower olim after they have arrived. Dahan explains that JAFI has developed a new method of mentoring to help olim once in Israel. "Each and every member of staff now receives special training and has three or four families that they mentor on independent life in Israel," he adds. "The idea is that the olim feel that they are independent from day one."

The empowerment program covers the six key areas of language, home, utilizing services, family, identity and employment. The program starts from the basics of time management and celebrating Jewish holidays to the ability to find employment that will realize one's potential.

According to Dahan, an impressive 90% of the Ethiopian adults of working age find jobs in Israel. The real question is: what kind of work? Due to a lack of experience in the business world, a large number of Ethiopians initially find low-paid work as cleaners, gardeners or kitchen help. But through mentoring and other forms of training, JAFI can assist immigrants to find jobs in their chosen profession.

Photo: Yehuda Lifshitz, Jewish Agency For Israel

The Jewish Agency's Eli Cohen welcomes a new immigrant from Ethiopia

"If you look today at the Ethiopian community - there are a lot of success stories," says Dahan. "There are Ethiopian Knesset members, others work in education, social work and lots more fields. But on the other hand, many of them are still very poor, so we are trying to help them."

One notable success story is Shlomo Molla, who is now a member of Knesset representing the Kadima party. Molla was born in a small Ethiopian village in 1965 and attempted to immigrate to Israel in 1984 on foot, after being overlooked by Operation Moses and Operation Joshua. Eventually rescued by Israeli forces in Sudan, he served in the IDF, studied at Bar Ilan University and became Head of JAFI's Ethiopian Division before joining the Knesset in 2008.

Other inspiring figures include Abatte Barihun, a saxophonist who arrived in Israel in 1999 and worked as a dishwasher before becoming a recording artist, and Kabra Kasaim the lead singer for the Idan Raichel Project who was born in a Sudanese refugee camp to Ethiopian Jewish parents during Operation Moses. Although it is still the poorest community in the country, it seems that the Jews of Ethiopia are gradually finding their voice in Israel. "Israeli society has changed its perception of olim from Ethiopia," says Dahan. "They are now Israelis. Indeed, the term 'absorption' seems almost out of date in modern Israel.

In a relatively short period of time, Ethiopian immigrants have become an integrated part of Israeli life, yet they have also added much to the diversity of the country with their own culture. With the support of organizations such as JAFI, this ancient Jewish community, with an epic history of its own, can finally grow and flourish. ■

Ethiopian Jews in numbers

- 7,846 people who are eligible to immigrate to Israel are left in Ethiopia according to the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry.
- 1.75% of Israel's population comes from Ethiopia.
- 38,500 (32%) of Israel's Ethiopian community are native-born Israelis.
- 240 Ethiopians made Aliyah in 2009, compared to 800 in the first two months of 2011.

For more details on the Jewish Agency for Israel's Ethiopian Project, see www.jewishagency.org/ethiopianproject.

A Recipe for Success

Take talented individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds, give them an improved education, blend with professional expertise, mix in some fun and social activities, and the result should be a shining success story. This is the thinking behind the Ariela Foundation - a unique new organization focused on the advancement of excellence among Israelis of Ethiopian descent / Daniel Savery

Established in 2008, Ariela is a modern non-profit organization founded on business-based principles. "Our vision is to adopt a group of kids each year and accompany them throughout a period of ten years, through middle school, high school, army service and university studies," explains Eric Goldberg, Head of the Board of Directors of Ariela. "The final goal is that our youngsters enter the job market with a higher than average salary."

Many college graduates of Ethiopian origin end up working in very low-income jobs and Ariela wants to break this cycle. "The best way out of poverty is through professional success," says Goldberg, speaking over a coffee in Tel Aviv. "It involves a lot of work and patience, but this is the only long-term solution."

Ultimately, if Barack Obama can become President of the United States, then perhaps one day an Ethiopian child could become a leader in Israel. Although academic success is a major focus of the Ariela Foundation, Goldberg is aware that excellence can come in many shapes and forms. "There's more than one way to succeed in life," he says. "Excellence can also come in the form of sports, arts and community work. There are many ways in which someone can be outstanding at what they do."

Promoting excellence

The Ariela Foundation was named to commemorate Ariela Batia Goldberg, a two-year old girl who died in a tragic domestic accident in 2007 in Los Angeles. By early 2008, Eric Goldberg set about establishing the foundation and set up offices in the town of Ness Tziona last July, with three part-time employees.

Born in Mexico City in 1969, Goldberg has been living in Israel since high school and has worked in a variety of business development roles. Today, he works full-time as the Post Manager of the Australian Trade Commission in Israel and manages Ariela on a volunteer basis in his spare time. He says that from the very beginning Ariela was developed as a non-profit organization based on business principles.

"We looked around and tried to find a niche market. We realized that the Ethiopian sector has more NGOs than any other sector in Israel, but we didn't see someone who was strictly dedicated to the promotion of excellence," says Goldberg. "Of all the sectors in Israeli society, the Ethiopian community is probably the weakest in terms of socio-economic standing."

The Ethiopian community in Israel consists of more than 120,000 individuals. The narrative of Ethiopian Jewry, which survived some 2,500 years in exile, is an epic tale. Although small groups of Ethiopians came to →

Participants in the Ariela Foundation's Star Program are enriched by a variety of water sports

← Israel in the 1950s, the majority arrived during 'Operation Moses' from Sudan in 1984 and 'Operation Solomon' in 1991. The latter operation was one of the IDF's most ambitious ever - in just 36 hours, 14,500 Ethiopian Jews were airlifted to Israel in 34 military and civilian flights.

Goldberg believes that these operations mark one of the most beautiful chapters in Jewish history. "Israel was the first case in history where African-born people were brought not as slaves but as brothers," he says proudly.

However, settling a large Ethiopian community in Israel has not been without its problems, as Goldberg explains: "Israel has been absorbing immigrants for the last 60 years, but it seems we don't always learn from our mistakes. I think sometimes we might need a little bit more cultural sensitivity. For example, some Ethiopians who came to Israel were told to drop their old names and pick a new Hebrew name from a hat."

The kids learn basic life-skills ranging from study strategies and public speaking to using Google

Self-identity is one of the key topics in Ariela's professional workshops run by professionals from the Green Institute for Advanced Psychology. "A lot of the youngsters who are born here have no connection to Ethiopian culture, but on the other hand some don't feel Israeli," says Goldberg. "Sometimes they identify more with Afro-American singers in the US. So, it's very important that they feel part of the Jewish people and part of Israel."

Optimistic about the future

At the heart of Ariela's work is the Star Program. The first Star Program kicked off in November 2008 and works in partnership with two co-sponsors: the Municipality of Ness Tziona and Ziv Neurim, an organization that runs water-sports activities. Every Tuesday, the group of students can take part in a variety of water-based sports activities such as sailing, surfing, kayaking and diving. On Wednesdays. the kids also learn basic life-skills, ranging from study strategies and public speaking to how to do a basic search on Google. Ariela also provides tutorial lessons, to help the group with mathematics, English and language skills.

Aside from the Star Program, Ariela offers financial assistance to students on a case by case basis. For example, the foundation provides funding for outstanding students on the MOOLA Program for middle school students at Bar Ilan University. It also granted a scholarship to a gifted 14-year old boy for university-level studies and helped young students with excellent grades who could no longer afford the transportation costs to their school.

Nelson Mandela once said "Education is the most powerful weapon you can use to change the world," and Ariela puts this into practice. The foundation aims to expand the Star Program by enrolling a second group of youngsters in the third quarter of 2009. Last year's Annual Report set the fundraising target for 2009 at US$ 350,000. That might not be much compared to larger NGOs, but to Ariela' students it means the world. "We're not a huge organization; we're a high-quality, boutique NGO," Goldberg says.

Despite current financial pressures, Goldberg remains optimistic about the future. "Israel is a very tough, competitive society," he says. "But I believe it has more social mobility than most Western countries. You just have to find your way through this maze." He gives an example of one of Ariela's community coordinators, Alon Demle, who grew up as a shepherd in Ethiopia with no formal schooling, but now has a BA in English Studies from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

Indeed, the real beneficiary of Ariela's long-term work is the state of Israel. "We are not doing the Ethiopians any favors when we conduct activities among them," says Goldberg. "We are serving ourselves. We are serving the whole of Israeli society." ■

For more information or to donate to Ariela, please call 08-9367030, email: admin@ariela.org.il, or visit www.ariela.org.il.

Reaching Out

When Henry Morgenthau asked Jacob Schiff for $50,000 to help Palestinian Jews in 1914, he had no idea that he was in fact creating a global humanitarian organization: the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC). Today, JDC (also known as 'the Joint') serves the needs of Jews in distress in over 70 countries and also provides emergency aid in Africa and Asia / Daniel Savery

Speaking from his home in New Jersey, Steven Schwager, JDC's Chief Executive Officer, understands the importance of his task. "We are the overseas arm of the American Jewish community, the most generous and prosperous Jewish community in the history of the Diaspora. So we have a special responsibility," he says. "The biggest projects are reaching out to the unaffiliated Jews in the FSU (former Soviet Union) and continuing our work in Israel."

Before joining JDC over 20 years ago, Schwager worked in the New York City Controller's Office, where he learned about financial markets. He says that modern donors require their charities to act like businesses, with financial statements, transparency, accountability and independent evaluation.

Despite the current economic crisis, Schwager remains optimistic. "This year, the annual Greenberg dinner raised $43 million, compared to $40 million last year. In Philadelphia they are raising more money than ever before. In New York, we are saying 'those that can give should give more.'" he says. "I believe that we will recover from this shock, and philanthropy, which is a strong custom in America, will continue to be strong."

Arnon Mantver, Director of JDC-Israel, agrees: "In a financial crisis, as in any crisis, the poorest people suffer the most. It has always been our policy to deal with the neediest of the needy."

Helping all sectors

Although often referred to as a flourishing economy, over 30% of Israel's children and elderly live in poverty, as do more than 50,000 Ethiopian-Israelis. In 1991, the JDC assisted in Operation Solomon, where 14,500 Ethiopian Jews were airlifted to Israel in El Al cargo planes to escape military rebels. These Ethiopian Jews can now benefit from JDC programs that help combat chronic unemployment and poverty. One such program, PACT (Parents and Children Together), operates in 14 cities throughout Israel. "PACT focuses on bringing kids into kindergarten, enriching their ability in the areas of language and mathematics, and helping families financially, but also educating parents on how to deal with their children in a new culture and country," explains Mantver.

Working alongside the Government, JDC -Israel also develops models to enhance care for Israelis with disabilities. In 2009, the organization will celebrate 40 years of its oldest partnership, JDC-Eshel, which provides care for the elderly. JDC-Israel also assists populations affected by the Second Lebanon War and people living in Sderot, while remaining non-partisan and apolitical. "We work with Israeli-Arabs, Palestinians and other countries in the Middle East," says Mantver. "We have one project called Echad, which focuses on early childhood education in the Arab community."

A little girl hugs "Hibuki" as part of JDC's emergency trauma counseling for children from Sderot and the Gaza border region

The fact that JDC is non-political has enabled it to work with a range of governments from Cuba to Syria - where there was once a Jewish community - and of course the FSU. In the FSU, which includes Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Moldova, Russia, the Ukraine and many other countries. JDC works to foster self-sufficient communities and enables Jews to reconnect with their heritage.

Focusing on the FSU

"Our best guess is that there are 1.5 million Jews living in the FSU today," says Schwager. "Collectively, through all of our programs, we touch around 500,000 Jews. If I'm right, that means there are a million Jews out there who are not yet connected with the Jewish people in any way, shape or form."

"We also work with 28,000 needy Jewish children in the FSU (in partnership with the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews) who live in the worst poverty imaginable - without a book, bed or winter coat," he adds. "These are children simply disconnected from the world."

Over the past 15 years, JDC has created 185 Hesed welfare centers in the FSU that provide material and emotional support to over 170,000 elderly Jews. "These are the poorest Jews on Earth," explains Schwager. He tells the sad tale of a 102-year-old Moldovan woman he met called Clara Cogan. "She lives on the fifth floor of a five-story building. Her husband died 25 years ago and her only son died 20 years ago. She hasn't been out of her apartment in 12 years because she can't walk down the stairs. We bring her food, medicine and clothing. The only people who come to visit her are the volunteers of the welfare center. This woman could be my grandmother and no one cares about her."

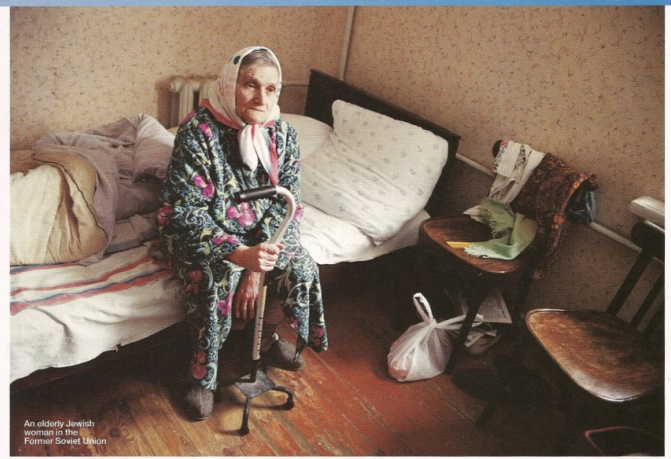
One of JDC's recent campaigns was to assist some of the 10,000-12,000 Jews who live in Georgia. On August 7th, 2008, the Russian-Georgian conflict erupted and within 24 hours JDC field staff launched rescue operations for hundreds of people. The organization advanced $50,000 to the Georgian Red Cross and 300 displaced members of the Georgian Jewish community were welcomed at a Hesed center in Tbilisi. "In the true Jewish belief that all Jews are responsible for each other, many of the people we brought to Tbilisi stayed with relatives and friends there. About 100 had nowhere to stay and we put them up in hotels and shelters," says Schwager. "Now that the war is over, around 250 have gone back to their homes and 50 are homeless. Those who went back found that their homes had either been destroyed or stolen."

Empowering women

Another major area of JDC activity is Latin America. In Argentina, an estimated 24,000 Jews were left impoverished, following a huge economic collapse in 2001. Seven years later, there are encouraging signs of economic recovery. Schwager admits that Argentina is one of his favorite Jewish communities in the world and describes it as "Judaism with tango."

An Argentinean program called Baby Help has been successful in helping young mothers struggling to care for their children. JDC aims to empower Jewish women worldwide. "The key to every strong society is to ensure that women become an integral part of the community," says Schwager. "Generally, we find that communities that empower women become stronger and more vibrant."

This year, JDC's WHEP (Women's Health Empowerment Program) celebrates its fifth year of partnership with Susan G. Komen for the Cure, the largest grassroots network of breast cancer survivors and activists. This innovative global movement encourages women to openly talk about breast cancer. Susan G. Komen, who started the initiative as a promise to her dying sister, is very proud of its global achievements, as facilitated by its partnership with JDC. In accordance with the Jewish tradition of *tikkun olam* (repairing the world), JDC's International Development Program (IDP) provides disaster relief, reconstruction and development assistance on a non-sectarian basis. For example, in the days following the 2004 Southeast Asian Tsunami, JDC raised $18 million and continues to support those communities.



An elderly Jewish woman in the Former Soviet Union

On August 7th, 2008, the Russian-Georgian conflict erupted and within 24 hours JDC field staff launched rescue operations for hundreds of people

More than just money

The Joint's core budget for 2007 was $69.5 million, although it leveraged a total of $352.8 million for projects worldwide. A vast proportion of the funding comes from United Jewish Communities (UJC), which represents over 400 independent Jewish communities across North America. Other major funding partners include the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, World Jewish Relief (UK), Canadian Jewry, government agencies and other international organizations. According to JDC's 2007 Annual Report entitled 'Global Partners for a Brighter Future', $159.3 million of the organization's budget was allocated to projects in Israel and $119.6 million went to the FSU.

So what was this money spent on? A large proportion was spent on social and community development (22.2%), an extra 22.2% on services to the elderly, 19% on relief and welfare, 18.9% on Jewish education, 9.4% on health services, 2.5% on non-sectarian aid, 3.1% on manpower development, 2.1% on research and development and just 0.6% on religious activities.

There is no doubt that the Joint has been incredibly successful at fundraising and in the future it hopes to develop partnerships with a new generation of philanthropists in Israel. But the JDC has always been about more than just money. In 1947, Dr. Joseph J. Schwartz, then Director of the JDC, said: "In our hands lies a great responsibility that transcends all concepts of dollars and cents. We cannot rest and enjoy the good things of life as long as we know our brethren are in need."

This notion still runs through the heart of the JDC. "The Joint's goal is to make sure that no Jew goes to bed hungry at night," says Schwager. "We would hope that one day every Jewish community around the world could be free-standing and independent."

If you would like to make a contribution or receive further information on the JDC, please visit www.jdc.org.

BUILDING BRIDGES

Combining theoretical study with practical training, the **Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya** – better known as IDC – is the hub of Israel's future. Students from all over the world flock to the campus because of its excellent academic programs taught in English and from its unique international atmosphere / Dan Savery

STUDENTS SPEAK ABOUT IDC

■ **Maya Selber, 22, from Philadelphia, PA.**

"I'm currently studying as a third year student in the communications school at IDC. What I've loved the most about IDC in my two years here so far is the international nature of the student body. I attended the University of Pittsburgh for a year before I transferred to IDC, and my classmates and friends there came from such far away lands as Ohio and New Jersey. Now, classmates from Kyrgyzstan, Eritrea and Moldova surround me, and some of my closest friends are from places like Luxembourg and Chile. My life has been enriched both academically and socially because of IDC's global makeup. When studying the effects of globalization on media, input from students from Colombia, Mexico and Sweden offers a unique perspective on the subject, something that is rare in most school settings."

Far left: (From left to right) IDC students Raz Ashrov, Business, from Kenya; Jacobo Benozillo, Business, from Mexico; Miriam Bensky, Government, from Finland

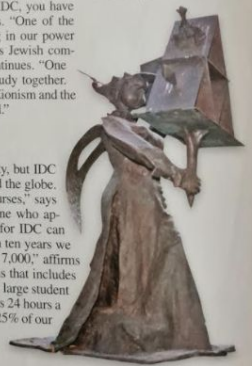
Left: (From left to right) Aaron Scott Dubin, Business student, Philadelphia, USA; Talia Isaacson, Communications, South Africa; Caroline Hannah Spierer, Communications, Switzerland

STUDENTS SPEAK ABOUT IDC

■ **Ethan Chernofsky, 24, from Pennsylvania and New Jersey, now doing an MA at the London School of Economics.**

"I came to Israel at 18 and served in the IDF. The natural progression was to continue my studies, and government studies was a clear choice for me. Looking back now, having finished my degree, I think IDC was a perfect choice and I feel lucky to have studied there. The professors and lecturers were excellent, the staff very helpful and the school provided me with a range of opportunities to help refine skills necessary to pursuing a career in the public sector. However, the greatest advantage the IDC offered me was the opportunity to study in a truly international environment. The multitude of backgrounds and ideologies of the students created an atmosphere that provided me with an education that went far beyond, and in some cases far above, what was present in the classroom."

"My life has been enriched both academically and socially because of IDC's global makeup"



The Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya is unique for many reasons. Founded in 1994 by Professor Uriel Reichman, IDC is Israel's first private college. It is also the most international Israeli university, with 24% of its students coming from overseas to the Raphael Recanati International School. These students come to study Government, Business, Law, Computer Science, Psychology and Communications, but just as significant is the fact that IDC students get to meet, socialize and network with people from all over the world. "We have students from 74 countries," says Jonathan Davis, Head of the Raphael Recanati International School and Vice President of IDC. "We are the most international university in Israel. The largest universities have, at best, two or three percent of their students from overseas."

The English advantage

The Raphael Recanati International School was established in order to allow students from around the world to benefit from high-level academic programs at IDC by offering courses in English. In fact, more than any other Israeli educational institution, IDC offers a diverse range of programs in English. "If you want to do business, you need to know English these days," says Davis. "The fact that we teach in English is also a stepping stone for those who don't know Hebrew well enough to be able to come and study in Israel. It's a great way of allowing a critical mass of people to study in an environment with which they are familiar." In addition, many Israelis who would like to perfect their English-language skills and meet students from other countries also study at RRIS.

Zionism has always been at the heart of IDC. "While they are studying here, many of our students take an *ulpan* and improve their Hebrew, and now we are about to open a Hebrew summer *ulpan*," says Davis. "In fact, 70% of those who study here end up staying in Israel on a permanent basis. It makes us one of the largest academic absorption centers in the country, if not the largest!"

The school currently comprises around 1,200 students from all over the world, including significant numbers from the United States, Canada, Western and Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union – but also from Latin America, South Africa and Australia, plus handfuls from other countries such as India, China, Egypt, Turkey and Morocco.

With this distinctly international flavor on campus, it is not surprising that IDC firmly encourages global networking. "When you graduate from IDC, you have friends all over the world," notes Davis. "One of the cornerstones of IDC is to do everything in our power to strengthen the bond between overseas Jewish communities and the State of Israel," he continues. "One fantastic way of creating a bond is to study together. Next year we are introducing courses in Zionism and the Bible, so we can explore our roots as well."

Removing walls

It may be a relatively young university, but IDC has gained a respected reputation around the globe. "There is a high demand for all our courses," says Davis. "I wish we could accept everyone who applies, but we can't." The future vision for IDC can be summed up in one word: growth. "In ten years we hope to have a student body of around 7,000," affirms Davis. "We would like to have a campus that includes dormitories, a sports complex and a very large student union, and it would be a campus that runs 24 hours a day. We envision always having at least 25% of our student body from overseas."

In its founding statement, IDC ►

STUDENTS SPEAK ABOUT IDC

■ **Shany Marianowsky, 21, from Miami, FL.**

"I'm a third year student in communications, more specifically in the persuasive communications track. So far, my experience at IDC has been great. I have met amazing people from all over the world. I can practically go to any country and I know that I have somewhere to stay – it's incredible! Apart from that, I have had some great professors and IDC is like a family because the classes are not overwhelmingly big and you can develop a close relationship with the professors. The faculty overall has been so helpful and always there. Also, one of the best aspects is all the cultural activities: I don't know any other college that takes students to cooking workshops, movies, trips, etc. I have no regrets and would not change it for anything in the world."

The US booth at the IDC's Annual International Festival earlier this year

Prof. Uriel Reichman
President and Founder
of IDC Herzliya

Jonathan Davis
Head of the RRIS and
VP for External Relations

◄ aimed to be "a university that will help remove walls of hostility in the Middle East, will serve students of all religions from this region and the rest of the world, and will advance the principles of peace." So how is this put into action? One of the most popular programs at IDC is the Government, Diplomacy and Strategy track, in which students learn about conflict resolution and counter-terrorism, both extremely relevant topics for Israel and, indeed, the world.

IDC also builds bridges by arranging conferences where students, academics and guests from all over the world take part and discuss vital issues. Now in its eleventh year, IDC's annual Herzliya Conference is one of the most important dates on Israel's political calendar. Speakers at last year's conference included Tzipi Livni and Stanley Fischer, the Governor of the Bank of Israel. The President of Israel, Shimon Peres, addressed the forum and Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu delivered the annual state of the nation address at the conclusion of the Conference.

Another initiative for building bridges is the Ambassadors' Club, where students learn how to explain events in Israel to people overseas. When study time stops, there is a whole host of extra-curricular activities available to students, including sports, a choir and a dance troupe. IDC also organizes field trips all over Israel which include hiking and mountain biking. In fact, there is so much going on at the campus that it has its own magazine and its own radio station that broadcasts to Raanana and Herzliya.

Bureaucracy busting

As an immigrant from the United States who made aliya in 1969, Davis recalls that he "ran into a lot of bureaucracy in Israel." He says his role at IDC today gives him a great deal of satisfaction because he is somewhat of a "bureaucracy buster." Davis explains that "IDC offers a much less bureaucratic system. Our acceptance process is more global. If a student is accepted into a good university in the United States, the UK, Australia or South Africa, such a person has a good chance of being accepted to IDC without all kinds of unnecessary bureaucratic procedures so prevalent in this country. If you don't need a psychometric exam to get into a good university there, then why force someone to do it here?" For those coming from the US, IDC accepts the SAT exam, which is much more user-friendly to students from that country.

Another of IDC's relative advantages is its affordable tuition fees, which are significantly lower than those of colleges and universities in the US. Degrees granted by IDC are accredited by the Israeli Council for Higher Education. "It's like studying at a very good European or American university at a fraction of the price," notes Davis. Furthermore, scholarships are available, as well as student loans and grants from a number of countries.

Yet, the biggest draw for those considering studying at IDC is what Prof. Uriel Reichman, President and Founder of IDC, calls the "openness to the international horizon." Studying at IDC is like joining a global community, where social and cultural activities add another dimension to education, while having the privilege

For more information about IDC Herzliya, visit www.mis.idc.ac.il

STUDENTS SPEAK ABOUT IDC

■ **Tal Dahan,19, from Los Angeles, CA.**

"I was born in the US to Israeli parents and grew up learning Hebrew through parents and friends but was still as American as you could get. I found out about IDC from a friend and after I saw that I would be able to experience Israel for three years [It was important that it was more than one year, since many of my friends did yeshiva experience and wished they could do more] and get a degree that at the same time was a dream come true. Studying at IDC has given me the experience of being in Israel and feeling like I actually belong. I met people from dozens of countries that I would have never even remotely had the chance to meet if it weren't for IDC."

UNITY, NOT UNIFORM

In just six years, NADAV has saved one of Israel's most important museums and has been instrumental in promoting the idea of Jewish Peoplehood worldwide. To find out more, we spoke to the people behind this visionary fund / Dan Savery Raz

Irina Nevzlin Kogan

Usually, when people make aliyah there is a period of adjustment to life in Israel. But Russian-born philanthropist and businessman Leonid Nevzlin hit the ground running. Since arriving from Moscow in 2003, he has been appointed a member of the Board of Governors of the Hebrew University, Tel Aviv University and the Jewish Agency for Israel. Nevzlin also founded the NADAV Fund, which saved Beit Hatfutsot (formerly known as The Museum of the Jewish Diaspora) from closing and he recently donated a further $6 million dollars to the new Museum of the Jewish People at Beit Hatfutsot.

Now it seems that his daughter, Irina Nevzlin Kogan, is following in his philanthropic footsteps. Since making aliyah in 2006, she has founded the Nevzlin Family Foundation, which directly assists children with cancer and blood diseases, and then launched the Israeli Center for Better Childhood. Today Irina has a young family of her own and is also the President of NADAV, an organization that she feels passionate about. But it wasn't always going to be this way.

Growing up in Russia, Irina didn't understand her father's concern for the Jewish community. "The age gap between us is very small (19 years), but the generational gap is huge," says Irina. "He was born when it was very hard to have any connection to Judaism, whereas I studied at a Jewish school."

While her father was President of the Russian Jewish Congress, Irina was embarking on a business career. She studied economics in Moscow before working in government relations and developing international strategies for major companies. She lived and worked in London for three years and then decided to move to Israel, although she says it wasn't only for Zionist reasons. "All my family had gradually moved to Israel," she explains. "My father suggested that I go into the charity world. I started by doing one day a week, then I got more and more involved until it became my full-time job."

Exploring the Jewish world

Instead of the business world, Irina Nevzlin Kogan now puts most of her time and energy into supporting the Jewish people. "I'm happy to use my professional skills and experience in something that is very ideologically natural for me," she says. But what exactly is the Jewish people? "I think it is the feeling of family, the feeling of someone who will take care of you," Irina answers. "Of course, I'm talking as someone who made aliyah."

She adds that there tends to be a big difference between Jews in the Diaspora and Jews in Israel. "If you look at the American Jewish community, many people feel proud to be both Jewish and American and this doesn't cause a conflict of interest for most. But in Israel, the Jewish agenda is not always popular."

Leonid Nevzlin (right) with the late Senator Tom Lantos

The NADAV Fund team

Apart from supporting the regeneration of Beit Hatfutsot, the NADAV Fund also organizes conferences and initiatives that encourage discussions on Jewish Peoplehood, and one theme that often arises is Jewish leadership. "We don't run leadership programs but we are moving in that direction," says Irina. She explains that NADAV helps to bring influential speakers to Israel, such as Professor William Duggan from Columbia University. Duggan is the author of many books, including 'Strategic Intuition: The Creative Spark in Human Achievement,' which focuses on how the mind can make giant leaps by combining existing ideas with new ways to solve a problem. "We invited him to Israel together with the Wexner Foundation, and the Rabin Center organized his lecture for an audience of young Israeli leaders and MBA students," she says. "We try and support conferences that inspire leadership."

Working in partnership with the Jewish Agency for Israel and the Jewish Federation of New York, NADAV forms part of the Jewish Peoplehood Hub. Louisa Valitsky, NADAV's Project Manager, explains: "The Hub is a triple initiative of a think-tank, program incubator and a creative center that deals with the issue of Jewish Peoplehood. On the one hand we are researching what is Jewish Peoplehood and on the other hand we are initiating projects to make Peoplehood happen."

Last February, NADAV initiated a panel at the Herzliya Conference that dealt with the issue and provided a platform for the Jewish Peoplehood Index. The Index was an innovative new survey that examined the connection between Jews in Israel and in America. This survey (of 18+ adults) had some groundbreaking results, showing that both societies felt that the other was the spiritual center of the Jewish people, that Israelis were more open to inter-marriage and that religiosity was more muted in Israel.

NADAV also supports the Jewish People Policy Planning Institute, and this year Leonid Nevzlin was appointed the Associate Chairman of JPPPI's Board of Directors and Professional Guiding Council. But the biggest project is still Beit Hatfutsot.

> We're not a religion that has a state; we're a people that has a state, and we're a people that also has a religion, culture and language

A new museum

The museum, located on the Tel Aviv University campus, has existed for over 30 years and tells the story of the Jewish Diaspora up until the State of Israel was declared in 1948. Now it is expanding to tell the ongoing story of the Jewish People through the ages.

"At first, we supported Beit Hatfutsot when it was at the point of economic collapse," says Valitsky, "but then we started working closely with developing the museum and now we are in the middle of building a completely new museum. This process is supported by the Government of Israel."

Indeed, great changes are underfoot, largely thanks to the backing of NADAV and Leonid Nevzlin. To underline this bold new direction, earlier this year the museum was renamed 'Beit Hatfutsot - the Museum of the Jewish People.' Nevzlin's recent $6 million donation kick-started a fundraising campaign for building the new museum, which is estimated to cost $24 million. Speaking at an event at Beit Hatfutsot to celebrate his 50th birthday in September this year, Leonid Nevzlin said, "The new museum will be one of the principal tools available to us for ensuring the future of the Jewish People and its prosperity. I believe that visitors at the museum will not only be moved emotionally, but it will also teach them about their Jewish roots, and succeed in connecting them with the collective story of the Jewish people."

NADAV's biggest mission is to ensure that Beit Hatfutsot re-opens its permanent exhibitions in 2012. Spread out over three floors, when completed it will be the largest experimental museum in Israel and the first museum of the Jewish people. However, →

Computer model of the new Museum of the Jewish People at Beit Hatfutsot

← interestingly, Louisa Valitsky says that saving Beit Hatfutsot is not NADAV's crowning achievement. "Our biggest achievement is generally promoting the idea of Jewish Peoplehood," she states. "NADAV was one of the first organizations that started discussing it and now this idea is being talked about in all corners of the Jewish world."

A diverse people

The notion of Jewish Peoplehood is a complicated one and means different things to different people. "One of the biggest problems is the question of how Jews differentiate themselves in different ways," says Avraham Infeld, NADAV's Senior Consultant on Jewish Peoplehood. "There are places where Judaism is defined as a religion and in purely religious terms. If you go to the United States and ask the average person 'What is a Jew?', he will say it's like being a Catholic, Protestant or Muslim; it's defined in completely religious terms. But ask a Zionist here in Israel and they'll define Jews as a nation. So we have a problem, we want to define ourselves for future generations."

When asked what unites Jews worldwide, Infeld says, "It is a people or family, with a very particular culture and way of viewing the world." Yet, within this unity there is great diversity and pluralism, which Infeld recognizes: "Look, we're not all going to be uniform or the same. We're not all going to become Chabadniks or make aliyah or become Reform Jews. The question is, can we still be unified as well as keep our different ways?"

So where do converts fit into this idea of Peoplehood? "The term 'conversion' causes many questions because you can convert to a religion but you cannot convert to a people," he says. "So the use of the term 'conversion' is confusing and undermines the sense of Peoplehood. But if we look at the Hebrew term 'giur', it doesn't mean conversion; it comes from a root that means someone who ties his lot to a people. It's a totally different concept."

"Very often people try to find the lowest common denominator that unites Jews," he adds, "but NADAV shows that there are a variety of ways in which one can be Jewish."

One organization that has been instrumental in bridging the gap between Jews in the Diaspora and Israel is Taglit-Birthright Israel, also supported by NADAV. "Birthright shows young American Jews another way of being Jewish from what they know," says Infeld. "Coming to Israel can change a kid's perception and make them ask, 'Maybe I should not reject what I was rejecting?'"

> Leonid Nevzlin: "The new Beit Hatfutsot museum will be one of the principal tools available to us for ensuring the future of the Jewish People and its prosperity"

A sense of belonging

Another major issue that is often associated with Peoplehood is the State of Israel and its relationship to Jews around the world. "When I was President of Hillel," says Infeld, "I met many students who couldn't understand why Judaism had a state. They would ask, 'If Judaism are a religion, why do we have a state? Why religion in the world has a state?' And they were quite right, because we're not a religion that has a state, we're a people that has a state. And we're a people that also has a religion, culture and language. It's a people with values, a people that has made a commitment to making a better world."

Although he agrees that Israel is an integral part of the life of the Jewish people, Infeld believes that the heart of Judaism lies in the concept of Tikun Olam (fixing the world). "The concept of Tikun Olam is central to Jewish daily life," he says. "It's a religion that says, 'I'm not only a religion' and 'I'm not only a nation.'" He defines NADAV's mission as working towards creating a "knowledge-based sense of belonging to the Jewish people." This sense of belonging doesn't refer to some far-off notion, but is based on Jewish heritage, Jewish future and the way that Jews would like to see the world.

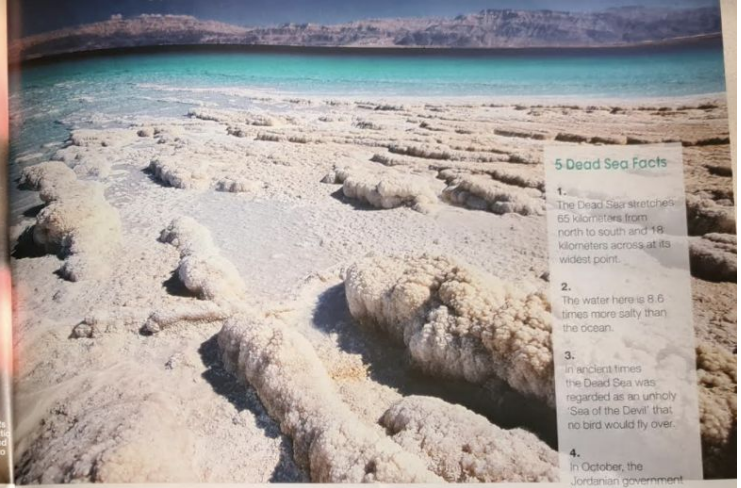
In many ways, the work of NADAV is much more than rebuilding a museum. It is a fund that encourages a new Jewish dialogue of pluralism and acceptance. "I'd like for us to develop a sense of respect for each other," says Infeld. "I believe that the Jewish people can create a model of something that is deeply lacking in the world today. And that is the possibility of creating unity without being uniform."

Irina Nevzlin Kogan, NADAV's President, is hopeful about the future of the Jewish people. "Personally I believe in a future in which Jews, wherever they live, feel connected and committed to one another, to our shared history and to our common destiny," she says. "It's not only a vision, but also a difficult challenge, especially considering all the turbulent changes the world is experiencing and the dynamic reality of the Jewish people.

The strengthening of Jewish Peoplehood is a historic mission, and I am proud and excited to contribute my share to this effort. I am so lucky to be surrounded by a wonderful team of experts. The personal and professional connections among us, and the young energy and enthusiasm of the people at the NADAV Fund, as well as their vast experience in the Jewish world, give me a great deal of hope and optimism for the future." In conclusion, says Irina, "I hope that, together with many others, we will succeed in assuring the future and the prosperity of the Jewish people."

For further information on the NADAV Fund and projects related to Jewish Peoplehood, please visit www.nadavfund.org.il.

Dead Sea mud has lots of therapeutic benefits, and is also fun to play with



Very Much Alive

There's no better time of year to visit the Dead Sea region than in winter. From replenishing spa treatments and desert treks to lighting candles on top of Masada, there's something here for everyone / Dan Savery Raz

Not all winter wonderlands are places covered in snow and ice. The Dead Sea and its surrounding desert region make a magical destination to visit in the winter months. Whether you are looking to relax in a natural spa, hike through ancient caves or simply float in the world's saltiest waters, this unique destination offers an unforgettable break.

The shores of the Dead Sea are one of the most mythical places on earth. Upon first glance at the water, it is almost difficult to believe that it is real. The seabed is crystallized with salt and its waters almost sparkle like diamonds. Little wonder that the Dead Sea is now a strong contender for one of the New Seven Wonders of Nature.

Known in Hebrew as *Yam HaMelach* (Sea of Salt), the Dead Sea is famed for being the lowest point on earth, lying some 400 meters below sea level. Situated in the heart of the Judean desert, the Tamar region's permanent population is only about 1,300, but the Dead Sea welcomes around 1.5 million visitors every year.

"I think it's a unique region even compared to other magical places," says Ofra Gazit, the spokesperson for the Tamar Regional Council. "It's like a natural greenhouse - everything you get here is pure and comes directly from nature. This place heals the body and the mind at the same time."

Miracle of light

In recent years, the Dead Sea has become a popular place to visit during Hanukkah, a festival associated with light and hope. "December is a fabulous time for families to explore our region," says Gazit. "The temperature is between 26° and 28° C and the water is still warm enough to bathe in."

Every Hanukkah, special menorahs (nine-candle candelabra lit during Hanukkah) are placed on the hills behind Ein Gedi, overlooking the Dead Sea. "If you walk along the path of the botanical gardens from Ein Gedi, you will see school children lighting the candles on each night of the festival," she says. "It's one of the most special lights you will ever see."

Another seasonal tradition is the lighting of a giant Hanukkah menorah at the summit of Masada, organized by Chabad. Masada, a site associated with Jewish resistance against all odds, is an inspiring desert mountain rising high above the Dead Sea. Many visitors choose to climb Masada at dawn to avoid the midday heat and gaze at the beautiful sunrise.

A visit to Masada, now a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is not complete without stopping at the museum which was opened in May 2007. The **Masada Museum** was developed by the Institute of Archaeology of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and combines archaeological artifacts with a theatrical atmosphere. It is accompanied by audio explanations telling the famous story of how in the year 73 CE nearly 1,000 Jews committed suicide on Masada rather than surrendering to the attacking Roman Army.

Hiking through history

Masada and the Dead Sea are not the only wonders in the Tamar region. Running alongside the sea are hills dotted with mysterious caves which are said to have provided hiding places for King David, Herod and Bar Kochba. **Nahal David**, just north of Ein Gedi, is a 20-minute walk along paths beneath caves that bring you up to the sparkling cascade of a natural waterfall. Another desert oasis is the hidden waterfall at **Nahal Arugot**. The trail reveals the replenishing effect of fresh water in the wilderness and is also a great place to see local bird and wildlife such as the ibex (*'yael'* in Hebrew).

The **Qumran National Park** is a network of caves where the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered inside earthenware jars in 1947 by a Bedouin shepherd boy searching for his stray goat. Now on display at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, the scrolls are considered to be one of the most important discoveries in history. Excavations at Qumran have revealed the settlement and caves of the Essenes, a Jewish sect that authored the scrolls, which include writings of the Bible, Apocrypha and other texts. There is a

Photos by Zo Mercer and the Israel Tourist Board

5 Dead Sea Facts

1. The Dead Sea stretches 65 kilometers from north to south and 18 kilometers across at its widest point.
2. The water here is 8.6 times more salty than the ocean.
3. In ancient times the Dead Sea was regarded as an unholy 'Sea of the Devil' that no bird would fly over.
4. In October, the Jordanian government announced its plans to extract more than 10 billion cubic feet of water a year from the Red Sea, feed most of it into a desalination plant to create drinking water and send the salty waste-water to the Dead Sea.
5. In Arabic, the Dead Sea is called "*al-Bahr al-Mayyit*," although it is also referred to as the Sea of Lot. Other names found in the Bible include *Yam ha-Miznahi* (the Eastern Sea), *Yam ha-Arava* (Sea of the Aravah) and the Greeks called it Lake Asphaltites.

EVERY HANUKKAH, SPECIAL MENORAHS ARE PLACED ON THE HILLS BEHIND EIN GEDI, OVERLOOKING THE DEAD SEA

Floating in the Dead Sea - the water is warm the winter too

DEFINITELY NOT FOR THE FAINT-HEARTED, NAHAL DRAGOT IS AN ALL-DAY TREK INLAND THAT CAN TAKE UP TO NINE HOURS TO COMPLETE

small museum next to the entrance of the national park, which gives a potted history of the site and of course has a cafe and souvenir shop.

Serious hikers looking for a challenge should head to **Nahal Dragot**, which is a deep desert valley (or *wadi*) located 18 km north of Ein Gedi. Definitely not for the faint-hearted, this is an all-day trek inland that can take up to nine hours to complete. There is a lot of climbing involved and at one point a 30-meter rope is needed to descend a cliff face. Along the way, there are stunning natural caves with an astonishing mix of colored rock.

Sport or spa

There are plenty of activities for children of all ages in this region. **Kalia Beach** is home to Karting 2000, the largest go-kart track in Israel, and many of the major hotels in Ein Bokek have fun water slides and swimming pools. Most of the local hikes have shorter trails suitable for children and winter is a great time to explore the region by bicycle.

This December, the Dead Sea will become a mountain bike race course, when the annual **Desert Challenge** returns. Held on December 4th and 5th, the race offers a chance for cyclists to enjoy the magnificent scenery as the track winds from the north to the south of the Dead Sea, as well as inland.

If all that riding wasn't enough exercise, you can take part in the **Ein Gedi Race** on February 20th, 2010. This unique marathon, now in its 27th year, starts at 6:30 am in the Ein Gedi hot springs. "The 2010 Ein Gedi race is a chance for athletes and nature lovers to run or walk along the magical shores of the Dead Sea and inhale the salty air, between the breathtaking mountains of Yehuda and Mo'av," says Yitzhak Borba, CEO of the Dead Sea Regional Enterprises Company. For details on the race, go to www.deadsea-race.co.il.

For those who simply want to relax and get pampered by the healing powers of the Dead Sea, the **Ahava Visitors Center** is a must. Located in Mitzpe Shalem, the center offers excellent deals on its mineral skincare products that are currently being launched around the world.

Perhaps the most famous spa is at **Ein Gedi**. Overlooking the impressive Moab Mountains of Jordan, Ein Gedi Spa is a natural wellness center combining the four natural elements of water, sun, mud and air. Open 363 days a year (only closed on Yom Kippur and Yom Kippur eve), it offers Swedish, Thai and Shiatsu massages, plus the famous black mud bath. Kibbutz Ein Gedi is home to around 500 people, is a spectacular green spot in the Judean desert, planted with trees from Africa. For more information, see www.ein-gedi.co.il.

Other luxury spas and hotels can be found in the **Ein Bokek** tourist area, marketed as the world's largest natural health spa. The Dead Sea's thermo-mineral hot springs are good for muscles, blood circulation, rheumatic pain and just about any other condition. People from all over the globe come to bathe here and feel its waters sizzle their skin.

Saving a wonder

Unfortunately, the Dead Sea - a unique natural phenomenon - is fading away. According to Friends of the Earth Middle East (FOEME), the Dead Sea is shrinking at a rate of 1.2 meters per year. Some researchers believe that the rapidly declining water levels have contributed to the huge sinkholes appearing in the ground. Today, around 1,700 sinkholes are registered at 30 different sites, from Neve Zohar in the south to Einot Zukim in the north.

Ofra Gazit of the Tamar Regional Council hopes that the nomination for the New Seven Wonders of Nature will increase awareness of what she calls the Dead Sea "crying" or "dying." "The Dead Sea is shrinking," she says, "and if no-one takes action, we will lose this resource in 50 to 60 years."

So what can be done to save this special sea? "There are five options on the table, including the Red-Dead or Med-Dead solutions," according to Gazit. "Wherever they put the pipe will hurt the environment in some way but we want them to bring water back from the Jordan and rejuvenate the river."

Gazit believes that the Dead Sea's chances of making the New Seven Wonders of Nature are very good. The lowest place on earth is currently 14th in the final 28 and will compete throughout 2011 for the hearts and votes of over a billion people from around the world. However, competition is tough and the other sites include the Amazon River, Table Mountain and the Grand Canyon. "All of these wonders are astonishing, but the Dead Sea is surely remarkable," says Gazit proudly. "There is nothing else like it on earth."

To vote for the Dead Sea as one of the New Seven Wonders of Nature, go to www.new7wonders.com.

For more information about the Tamar region, contact the visitors center at the Solarium, Ein Bokek: 08-9975010 or www.deadsea.co.il.

View of the Baha Gardens and Temple

Photos: Haifa Tourist Board

What's Happening in Haifa

Although often overshadowed by Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, Haifa is an extraordinary city in its own right. Visit Haifa this fall, when it hosts the Haifa Film Festival, the world-famous Body Worlds exhibition and much more / Dan Savery Raz

The old phrase "Haifa works, Jerusalem prays and Tel Aviv plays" seems tremendously out of date today. Although still an industrial, medical and technological hub, the city has so much more to offer visitors from all over the world. From magnificent museums and tranquil temples to beautiful beaches and hillside havens, Haifa has it all.

Located in the midst of the green and pleasant hills of Mount Carmel, Haifa is Israel's third largest city. Its rapid development owes much to its port, the biggest and busiest in the country and a major commercial gateway. But it wasn't always like this. Once upon a time, Akko was favored over Haifa as the area's main port and it remained that way for almost 2,000 years. When the Crusaders conquered Haifa in 1100, it became an important town but later fell to pirates and degenerated during the Mameluke and Ottoman periods.

In 1898, Theodor Herzl visited Haifa and wrote about its glorious potential in his book 'Altneuland.' In the 1920s, British engineer Sir Frederick Palmer stated that Haifa's deep waters and natural secluded bay made it the perfect place for large industrial shipping. Subsequently, the port was officially opened in 1933 and the city hasn't looked back since.

Mediterranean melting pot

Haifa was the first port of call for shiploads of early Zionists and still has a large influx of immigrants today. Regarded as a unique Mediterranean melting pot, the city of Haifa has a population of 265,000, although the district is home to over one million residents.

The German Colony

FROM MAGNIFICENT MUSEUMS AND TRANQUIL TEMPLES TO BEAUTIFUL BEACHES AND HILLSIDE HAVENS, HAIFA HAS IT ALL

In many ways, Haifa has come to symbolize modern multiculturalism, and people from all faiths make pilgrimages to the city. Walking through Haifa's streets or holy sites, it is easy to spot influences from a kaleidoscope of cultures, and Haifa's residents are rightly proud of their pluralism. "As home to Jews, Christians and Muslims - religious and secular - Haifa serves as a unique example of tolerance and peaceful co-existence for all of Israel and the Middle East," says Rafael Beyar, Director-General of Haifa's Rambam Health Care Campus, the largest medical center in the North.

"Haifa is one of the unique cities of the world," affirms Moshe Tzur, Director of Haifa's Tourist Board. "It is a place where seemingly very different religions and cultures such as Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Druze and Baha'i can live together in harmony."

This concept of "living together" is an important one in today's world and is reflected in one of the city's major events this fall - the **Haifa International Film Festival**. Running throughout Sukkot, from October 2nd to 11th, it is Israel's biggest and most significant film festival. Last year, it was enjoyed by more than 60,000 spectators and the event was attended by Paul Schrader, writer of 'Taxi Driver' and director of 'Adam Resurrected' and French screen legend Jeanne Moreau. Organizers expect this year's festival to be even better. Films come from all corners of the planet ranging from Gala Premieres to cutting edge art-house and world cinema. Screenings take place in seven venues across the city including the Cinematheque and the Rappaport Arts and Cultural Center.

Body, mind and soul

Another terrific reason to visit Haifa now is to see Gunther von Hagen's **Body Worlds**, perhaps the most talked about exhibition on earth. Recently extended until September 30th, this is not everyone's cup of tea, but if you don't mind seeing a skinless human body playing guitar or bouncing a basketball, then this is the place to be. The exhibition is housed in MadaTech, otherwise known as the Israel National Museum of Science, Technology and Space in Haifa.

MadaTech is one of Haifa's hottest attractions and is housed in the historic Technion Building, which was built at the beginning of the 20th century and was used as a military hospital after World War I. The museum is fun for both adults and children and includes the Hall of Mirrors, Hall of Darkness and 3-D visual illusions that you can reach out and 'touch'. One of the topics you can explore in the education wing focuses on the history of computers - from those laughable machines that started out as huge scientific calculators filling entire rooms to tiny 21st century devices that dominate our lifestyle. Other enticing exhibits include the 'My Green Home' section, dedicated to renewable energy solutions and the Leonardo da Vinci room, which looks at the great Italian Renaissance artist's contribution to modern science and engineering.

Of course, no visit to Haifa is complete without a trip to the **Baha'i Gardens and Temple**. With over half a million visitors a year, the Baha'i Gardens are one of the most beautiful gardens in the world and among the most popular tourist attractions in the area. Autumn is the perfect time of year to visit.

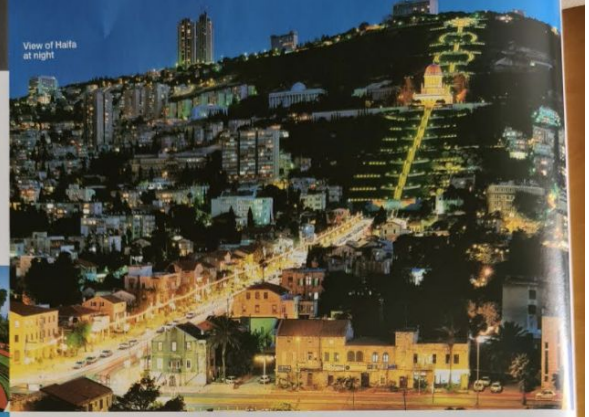
The gardens comprise a staircase of 19 terraces extending all the way up the northern slope of Mount Carmel, offering views of the sea below. The golden-domed Shrine of the Bab is set directly in the middle of the gardens and dominates from every angle. The Shrine is closed until October 11th due to restoration work but the surrounding gardens remain open to visitors throughout this period. However, if you want to see the inner gardens you will need to start early as they close daily at midday, with the outer gardens closing at 17:00.

The Shrine marks the resting place of Bab ('gate') the spiritual founder of the Baha'i faith, who was executed in Persia in 1850. The Baha'i faith is based on the oneness of humanity and its teachings - such as "The world is but one country and mankind its citizens" - still resonate today.

Although it is not mentioned in the New Testament, **Mount Carmel** does appear a number of times in the Bible. Carmel is most famously associated with the Prophet Elijah, who is said to have lived and taught from a cave hidden in the mountain. The cave is now a place of pilgrimage for all of the monotheistic faiths and is enshrined in a small domed chapel, situated below the

Did you know?

1. Haifa is one of the few cities in Israel where buses operate on Shabbat.
2. The Haifa underground railway system, 'Carmelit', is listed in the Guinness Book of World Records as the world's shortest metro line. It has a single track, six stations and two trains.
3. Haifa has 22 twin sister cities, including Boston, Cape Town, Marseilles, San Francisco, Shanghai, Odessa and the slightly less glamorous Hackney in East London.
4. The city was once nicknamed 'Red Haifa' because it was a stronghold of the Labor Party and trade unions.
5. Haifa has no less than 29 movie theaters for film buffs to choose from.



View of Haifa at night

ANOTHER TERRIFIC REASON TO VISIT HAIFA NOW IS TO SEE GUNTHER VON HAGEN'S 'BODY WORLDS,' PERHAPS THE MOST TALKED ABOUT EXHIBITION ON EARTH

Stella Maris Carmelite Monastery. The entrance to the cave is via an unimposing rock staircase that could easily be missed from the road, and the cave itself has been preserved underneath the altar. Construction of the Monastery and beautiful Basilica started in 1836, although the Carmelite monks have been attached to the region since the 12th century. The Monastery can be reached by climbing the slopes by foot or taking the cable car and is open daily, free of charge.

Culture and history galore

Directly below the cascading Baha'i Gardens lies the **German Colony**, with a string of top-class shops, cafés and restaurants lining the promenade of Ben-Gurion Avenue. Many of its buildings were restored in the 1990s and given plaques that describe the history of the area. The 'colony' was visited by Kaiser Wilhelm II in 1898 and Germans continued to live in the area until World War II, when the British threw them out as suspected Nazi collaborators. At the end of the street is the **Haifa City Museum**, which houses works from a changing selection of local, modern artists.

You can transport yourself to the Far East by visiting the **Tikotin Museum of Japanese Art**, next to the Dan Carmel Hotel. The museum, founded by Felix Tikotin in 1957, features everything from 14th century Buddhist scroll art to pottery, metal work and newer exhibits on Japanese animation and even Pokemon. One of the oldest parts of town is **Wadi Nisnas**, based around a thin Arab market street where you can buy all kinds of knick-knacks including nargilah pipes and Homer Simpson T-shirts. Here, it is possible to celebrate Ramadan, Christmas and Hanukkah at the same time.

However, Sukkot is one of the three major Jewish harvest festivals and Haifa offers a number of great activities for nature lovers. Keren Kayemeth LeIsrael-Jewish National Fund (KKL-JNF) organizes **nature tours of Mount Carmel and Ofer Forest**. If you have the

For more information about Haifa and its attractions, visit www.tour-haifa.co.il. To find out more about the Haifa Film Festival, go to www.haifaff.co.il. For details on the Body Worlds exhibition at Madatech, go to www.bodyworlds.com. For nature walks in the region, see www.kkl.org.il.

the woods and slopes of Haifa make a great destination for mountain bikers.

In autumn, the weather is still warm enough for those who just want to relax on the beach. **Bat Galim beach** is a popular spot for windsurfers and kiteboarders and just further out of town, accessible by road or by rail, is the beautiful Hof HaCarmel beach.

Set near the center of the Carmel and near Gan HaEm (Mother's Park), the **Haifa Zoo** is home to a range of different animals and is another great destination, especially for children. It is open from 8:00 until 16:00 throughout the fall and winter seasons. The **Railway Museum**, housed in the old Haifa East train station, features a collection of stamps, photographs, tickets, timetables and old steam engines. According to some of the old timetables, it was once possible to travel from Haifa by train south to Cairo or north to Beirut or Damascus.

It is fitting that the **National Maritime Museum** is also found in Haifa. Charting the history of seafaring and shipping in Israel, the museum also emphasizes the continuing affinity between the Jewish people and the sea.

But perhaps the biggest surprise is the **Clandestine Immigration and Israeli Navy Museum**, which may sound like a boring day out for school kids but is actually very moving as it tells of the struggle of refugees from 1934 to 1948. The museum is built around a ship called the '*Af Al Pi Chen*' ('in spite of all'). This monumental ship carried 434 refugees to what was then British-controlled Palestine in 1947. "The Immigration Museum is important because it tells the untold story of life after the Holocaust," says Moshe Tzur, Director of Haifa's Tourist Board. "It is especially interesting to tourists and new immigrants, who can learn about the early history of Israel."

Indeed, Haifa offers so much to see and do that it can be overwhelming. "My advice is to touch the atmosphere of the city," says Tzur. "Visit the holy sites and simply

THE FORWARD

CULTURE »

Theater That Touches

By Daniel Savery

March 11, 2009

Imagine a world of darkness and silence. Now, think how it would be to live like that every day. The experience of what it's really like — the thoughts, struggles and emotions of a deaf-blind person — is what a unique Israeli theater group is sharing via its latest production, "Not by Bread Alone."

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Nalaga'at (literally, "Do touch") is the only deaf-blind theater ensemble in the world. Housed since 2007 in a renovated shipping hangar on Jaffa's Old Port, the Nalaga'at Center also houses Café Kapish and the restaurant Blackout. Immediately upon entering, one will notice a type of atmosphere different from that of the usual theater reception. All the waiters employed at Café Kapish are deaf; they greet customers with warm smiles, hand them menus that teach the basics of sign language — "Please," "Thank you" and "Goodbye" — and before long, people are ordering their cappuccinos without saying a word. At Blackout, diners order and eat in complete darkness, assisted by blind waiters. This allows the customers to focus on taste, smell and touch.

Those senses are later intrinsic to the performance as the audience is taken on a tour through the lives of the 11 deaf-blind individuals onstage — all in the time span it takes to bake bread. During the performance (which is accompanied by Hebrew, Arabic and English supertitles), the wonderful smell of baking bread wafts around the theater, emanating from six ovens that form part of the set. As the show begins, the actors, all wearing chef costumes, prepare the dough and introduce themselves. Only three of the 11 can speak; the rest use interpreters. If that weren't hard enough, the group members also have to translate among Hebrew, Arabic, Russian, English and even Eritrean in order to communicate with one another.

Itzak Hanuna, who was born blind and went deaf at age 11 after falling ill with meningitis, uses glove language, where every joint on his hand symbolizes a Hebrew letter. He introduces himself by shouting, "If you told me a stunning blonde was around, it wouldn't mean a thing to me," and goes on to say that although deaf-blind people cannot see or hear, they all dream.

It's this world of dreams and memories that forms the narrative thread of the show: Zipora Malks's dreams of seeing a film in the cinema acted out by the rest of the group; Rafi Aku'a dreams of being a magician, and Yuri Oshorov realizes his dream of getting married under a *chupah*. At times, it's easy to forget that the people onstage cannot see or hear, as Genia Shtasky plays a Russian folk song on the piano, Marc Yarosky plays an accordion and the whole troop performs a choreographed dance while holding umbrellas.

The title of the show comes from Devarim 8:3: "He fed you the manna that neither you nor your forefathers knew, in order to inform you that not by bread alone does man live, rather by the entire expression of God's word." These words, later famously quoted by Jesus, provided the title of Vladimir Dudintsev's 1956 novel depicting corrupt Soviet bureaucracy. But Nalaga'at's show has little to do with politics or religion. In fact, the only time God is mentioned is when one of the stars of the group, Bat Sheva Ravenseri, remembers asking her father why she is deaf and blind, to which her father replies, "It comes from God."

Nalaga'at, a not-for-profit organization that works with people who have Usher syndrome — a common genetic condition in which a person is born deaf and acquires blindness — exists in Israel this year against all odds, overcoming cultural and financial barriers. Amazingly, Nagala'at is a commercially successful organization that generates most of its own funding, with only a third coming from the government and the rest from individuals and corporations.

Adina Tal, who was born in Switzerland and moved to Israel at the age of 20, created this groundbreaking group. Nalaga'at began in 2002 as a workshop for deaf-blind people, but soon the group's first production, "Light Is Heard in Zig Zag," became a resounding success. "When I began working with the performers, many of them were very depressed," Adina recalled. "They had found no enjoyment in life, and some even talked about suicide. Now they feel they have something to live for, because they have the ability to give to others."

"People come here thinking they are doing their good deed of the week," added Arieh Rosen, Nalaga'at's director of development. "But afterwards, people come up to us, the actors and the waiters, to give the most heartfelt, sincere thanks."

Indeed, at the start of the show, spectators who can hear and see feel pity for the actors. But by the end, the performers' empowerment has inspired the audience.

In 2002, Tal was asked to do a workshop with a dozen deaf-blind people who have Usher syndrome. Her first taste of deaf-blindness was when she walked into the room and nobody noticed. At the time, she was looking to make a change to her life, but she had no idea that it would come in the form of a not-for-profit organization and theater group.

Rosen spent six years living in London, where he worked as a theater producer. He just happened to see Nalaga'at's first production and joined the group while the center was being renovated.

To date, more than 70,000 people have

visited Nalaga'at in Jaffa. The group has also given sold-out performances to enthusiastic audiences in Toronto, Montreal, Boston and New York, and even performed at the United Nations headquarters in Geneva.

"We took them to the most amazing venues around the world," Rosen said. "Being with 11 deaf-blind individuals and dealing with security at Ben Gurion International Airport was like a play in itself!"

Rehearsals for "Not by Bread Alone" spread over the two years the hangar was being renovated. While rehearsing, Tal discovered that a drum and balloon could help the deaf-blind actors. After being taught to recognize the very delicate vibrations of a drumbeat through the skin of a balloon, the actors gradually learned how to take their cues.

The only drawback of such a production is that the stagehands and interpreters become part of the onstage performance. Although dressed in black, the stagehands occasionally distract viewers from the actors, and sometimes the spectator does not know whether to look at the stage, supertitle screen or interpreter. Attention is a privilege, however, and this, a theater of myriad focuses, reminds us of that.

At Nalaga'at, a new (or, you could say, ancient) form of communication is being developed. It is the communication of ideas, dreams and, of course, touch. "It's beyond words," Rosen said. "People always find ways of communicating with one another." An example of this is at the end of the show, when the actors receive taps from interpreters who translate the applause of the audience. Even though the performers cannot see or hear the clapping of hands, the audience's appreciation is communicated.

To build on its success, Nalaga'at is planning two international tours for 2010. There are also two new productions in the pipeline, one of which will be aimed at children. But already, "Not by Bread Alone" has a childlike innocence rarely found in modern theater. The play demonstrates the gifts that the deaf-blind have to give to society, and shows that even in a world of darkness and silence, there is humor and hope.

"Not by Bread Alone" runs until April 30. For more information, see www.nalagaat.org.il.

Daniel Savery is a writer, poet and freelance journalist from London who lives in Tel Aviv. He blogs at www.danscribe.com.

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JERUSALEM POST

A guide to Maimonides's Cordoba

A walk through the streets of the Spanish town where the Rambam was born yields traces of its medieval grandeur that disappeared with the Inquisition

• By DANIEL SAVERY

Luxury hotels named after rabbis are pretty rare wherever you are in the world. But what makes Hotel Maimonides even more unusual is the fact that it is located in Cordoba, a city without a modern Jewish community. This Andalusian city was the birthplace of Moses Maimonides, the great rabbi and philosopher whose works included the *Mishne Torah* and *Guide for the Perplexed*. Ironically, modern Cordoba is a perplexing place and one could use a good guide.

At first glance Cordoba's old Jewish Quarter (Juderia) is a pretty unimpressive sight. Its narrow alleyways, lined with simple whitewashed townhouses and souvenir shops, blend in with the rest of the Old City. Yet, this small and unassuming district is of great historical importance. The Juderia is home to one of only three medieval synagogues left in all of Spain (the other two are in Toledo).

Located on Judios Street, the exterior of the synagogue looks like little more than a dimly-lit doorway. The interior of this modest building is no bigger than a living room, but its high walls are covered with Hebrew inscriptions dating from 1350. Amazingly, this was the only synagogue in Cordoba that survived the centuries of Jewish persecution because it was converted into the Hospital de Santa Quiteria and later a Catholic chapel in 1588. Today it is a museum, two blocks from the UNESCO-protected Mezquita, a unique mosque built in the Jewish Quarter that was later consecrated as a Christian cathedral.

Plaza Potro and the rest of the Jewish Quarter were left empty of their original Sephardi Jewish population by the end of the Spanish Inquisition. (Cordoba Tourist Board)

The teachings of Maimonides have put Cordoba, where he was born, on the map as demonstrated by this statue of him on Tiberiades Square and a hotel named after him in the city. (Cordoba Tourist Board)

The Mezquita is the size of two soccer stadiums and was once a momentous place of worship. Thousands of people entered its gates every day. Blending Moorish and Christian architectural styles, it has almost become a symbol of coexistence and a major global tourist attraction.

In recent years, as increasing numbers of visitors head inland to cities like Cordoba, tour operators have noticed a rise in interest in Spain's Jewish history. "From our side there is a lot of interest in the Sephardic Jews program," says Josu Camacho, of Ole Spain Tours, which organizes Jewish heritage trips around the country. "Our tours include stops in Madrid, Toledo, Segovia, Cordoba and Barcelona. All of our tours have been fully booked and this summer is our busiest yet."

The guardian of Spain's Jewish heritage is a non-profit public association called the Red de Juderias de España. "We promote cultural, tourist and academic projects," Rafael Pérez, the network's representative in Cordoba, says. "For example, on Holocaust Remembrance Day this year, we held a ceremony in memory and homage to José Ruiz Santaella and Carmen Schroeder, citizens from Cordoba who had saved the lives of several Jewish women during the Holocaust. We also arrange concerts of Sephardic music at Casa de Sefarad."

Casa de Sefarad is a small house, opposite the old synagogue, comprising a library and shop specializing in Sephardic handicrafts, books and music. Sephardic songs can be sung in Hebrew or Ladino, an old Jewish language heavily influenced by Aramaic. Like other aspects of Sephardic culture, Ladino is experiencing a slight revival – singers such as Yasmin Levy have had moderate success in the "world music" genre. But in general, Ladino is a dying dialect. Most Ladino speakers are elderly people living in Greece, Turkey and Israel. Interestingly, Ladino was widely spoken in Cordoba around the time of Maimonides, although he wrote in Hebrew and Arabic.

There is a saying in Hebrew that "from Moses to Moses, there was none like Moses." Indeed, Maimonides (often known as the Rambam) is still highly revered and many rabbis are self-confessed Maimonides "groupies." The teachings of Maimonides have put Cordoba on the map and today there is a statue of the Rambam sitting with a book in his hand on Tiberiades Square.

Born in 1138, Maimonides left Cordoba after the Almohad invasion and settled in Fez and later Cairo. During his life, the Rambam was respected by Jews and non-Jews alike. He received letters from people from all over Europe and he answered them in Hebrew. His masterpiece, *Guide for the Perplexed*, was written in Arabic and tried to do the impossible – explain Judaism in a rational way.

The eighth to 11th centuries are sometimes referred to as the Golden Age of Spanish Jewry, as Judaism was able to flourish for a brief period. "Many Jews were craftsmen, traders, advisers of Christians and Muslims, but they also developed their own science, literature, religious studies and habits," says Pérez. "It is not known exactly when the first Jews arrived on the Iberian Peninsula, but possibly it was before the imposition of the Roman Empire. But what is certain is that Jewish culture found itself at home and with an important numerical presence."

During the Golden Age, Cordoba was one of the most populous cities in Europe with more than 150,000 inhabitants. Paris and London were small villages in comparison. It is estimated that 5,000-10,000 Jews lived in Cordoba at its peak.

"There are all kinds of research based on the taxes paid by houses and per family," explains Haim Ghiuzeli, director of databases at Beth Hatefutsoth. "But the accepted figure for the number of

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CORDOBA, Continued from Page 22

Jews in Spain before the expulsion is 200,000. Now, that is a huge number for its time. There were far fewer Jews in Eastern European countries."

So just how was this sizable Jewish community wiped out in Spain? As the children's poem goes, "In 1492, Columbus sailed the ocean blue" and in the same year Spain also banished its Jews. When the Catholic monarchs, Isabella and Ferdinand, conquered Granada, all Jews were expelled from Spain on Tisha Be'av, the anniversary of the destruction of the Temples in Jerusalem.

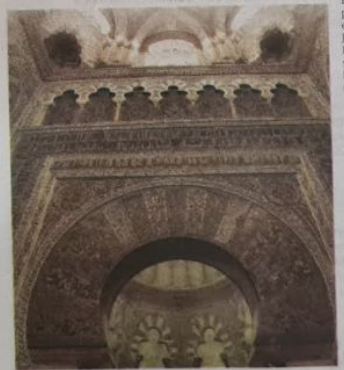
"It's a bit of a controversy how many Jews left Spain," says Ghiuzeli. "Half of them remained in Spain and converted to Christianity; some became assimilated in two or three generations and never to return to Judaism. The other half left Spain for Portugal, Italy and North Africa. Later they moved to the Balkan Peninsula, Greece and Istanbul, but that's another story."

There is no rabbi, no functioning synagogue and no signs of an active Jewish community. It is almost as if the Jews of Cordoba were transported to another time and place

Years of persecution had taught Jews that they could be baptized and still practice Judaism in the secrecy of their cellars. These "Conversos" or "New Christians" were also called "marranos" (swines) by the non-Jewish population. To purify Christian Spain, the Inquisition was introduced in 1481 and was not completely abolished until 1834.

By the end of the Spanish Inquisition the original Sephardic population almost completely disappeared. Thousands of people (Jews and Protestants) were discovered and burned at the stake.

"There is a legend that when the Jews left, they cursed Spain," says Ghiuzeli. "They vowed that no



The interior arches of the Mezquita. (Cordoba Tourist Board)

Casa de Sefarad, opposite the synagogue, aims to keep Sephardi Jewish culture alive. (Cordoba Tourist Board)

Jew would enter again and the Inquisition made sure of that. Only in modern times have Jews returned to Spain. There was a large immigration during the 1930s and some Jews even went to Spain to fight in the Spanish Civil War. Then there was a wave of immigration from Morocco and Gibraltar, which had been under British rule."

Spain ended World War II with less than 1,000 Jews, nearly all Ashkenazim. In 1965 the first public Jewish prayer service since the Inquisition was held on the island of Mallorca. Only in 1968, when a new synagogue was opened in Madrid, *did the government officially repeal the 1492 expulsion edict. Since the dictator Francisco Franco died in 1975, Jews have been arriving from* Argentina, Chile and Israel, as the population continues its steady growth. Today, there are more than 15,000 registered Jews in Spain, although the unofficial figure is approaching 50,000 (according to research by Tel Aviv University).

The Federacion de Comunidades Israelitas de España unites the communities from different parts of the country and represents Jewish interests to the government. The two major centers of Jewish life are now Madrid and Barcelona, followed by Marbella on the Costa del Sol. Other small communities are found in Alicante, Benidorm, Cadiz, Granada, Mallorca, Torremolinos and Valencia.

But for some reason the Jews have never returned to Cordoba. There is no rabbi, no functioning synagogue and no signs of an active Jewish community. It is almost as if the Jews of Cordoba were transported to another time and place.

There is an obvious link to Argentina's second largest city, Cordoba, which is 640 kilometers from Buenos Aires and home to more than 10,000 Jews. But that's where the comparison ends. Cordoba in Argentina is still recovering from an economic crisis, whereas Cordoba in Spain is one of the most affluent cities in the country.

Cordoba is home to the headquarters of some of Spain's most prestigious companies, including Noriega, which designs and constructs enormous high-class developments. In some ways, the new Cordoba looks a lot like the outskirts of Tel Aviv, with its abundance of cranes building ultra-modern apartment blocks. Although inland Spain is often affected by drought, in Cordoba there are numerous outdoor swimming pools and squares adorned with beautiful, but wasteful, fountains. Almost everything about the city shows that it is on the way up.

As outside interest in Cordoba continues to grow, perhaps the city will once again become a multicultural center for Christians, Muslims and Jews. Nevertheless, Spaniards are renowned for their slow and easy mañana approach, so any cultural revival will take a long time.

Another barrier to progress is prejudice, and anti-Semitic incidents continue to occur in Spain. In August 2007, neo-Nazi graffiti appeared on the Cordoba synagogue and Casa de Sefarad. Slogans included threats in German such as "Jews out" and "Achtung, there are Jews here." *When Jaime Sanchez, head of the Sefarad Word lodged a complaint with the national police they refused to deal with it and sent him to the local police, which had it removed. Sanchez* recalled that in early 2007 graffiti painted on the statue of Maimonides remained for three months before being erased.

A number of groups could have been responsible for the graffiti. Far-right parties in Spain such as Democracia Nacional and Alianza Nacional hold demonstrations targeting immigrants (especially Moroccans), and there are also a variety of smaller far-left groups that openly support anti-Zionism.

Last year, Susana Gordillo, Socialist mayor of Ciempozuelos, a province of Madrid, decided to dedicate January 27, the UN-sanctioned Holocaust Remembrance Day, to the "Palestinian genocide." This move was widely criticized after a complaint from Israeli Ambassador Victor Harel.

However, there are signs of improvement. In July 2007, 120 young Jews, Muslims and Christians from all over Spain took part in a coexistence meeting called *Hacedores de Paz* (Call to the Peacemakers) held at the Cordoba synagogue. People sat on the floor (there are no seats in the synagogue) and discussed issues relating to religious hatred. Like parts of Eastern Europe, it seems many young people in Spain are discovering their cultural roots, whatever they may be.

After a day spent walking around the Jewish Quarter, I stop in a café near the Mezquita, where I meet a lady named Monica Martinez, who asks why I am interested in Cordoba. At one point in our conversation, Monica says, "I think my family was Jewish. I can't explain why, but I feel a connection to the Jewish culture." It seems that even today, the traces of Conversos, those Christian Spaniards who are descendants of Jews, can still be found in the mystical city of Cordoba. Yes, Cordoba is indeed a perplexing place, but it is well worth making the journey. ■

Marcel Janco: Israel's unsung hero

The famous Dada artist was also a defender of Arabic architecture in Acre, Ein Hod and Jaffa

• By DAN SAVERY RAZ

The name Marcel Janco may sound familiar. One of the founding fathers of Dada and surrealist art in Europe in the early 20th century, his name is found in art history books next to geniuses like Salvador Dali, Man Ray or Pablo Picasso. But lesser known is the second part of his life, which is just as exceptional.

After making aliyah to Israel from his native Romania in 1941, Janco made it his mission to preserve and protect the country's authentic Arabic architecture. Following the 1948 War of Independence, the nationalist mood was to destroy any remnants of the past. The deserted Arab quarters of Acre, Ramle, Beit She'an and Tiberias were set to be demolished, as were huge areas of Old Jaffa.

Dada, not demolition

This demolition was not only due to political reasons – the State of Israel wanted to create a new chapter, a new book, even – and some of the old stone houses in these areas were in poor condition. Yet, Janco saw it differently. He fought and argued for the Arabic architecture, much of it built by the Ottomans, to be restored and saved as part of the country's heritage.

By the 1940s, Janco was a world-renowned artist and under prime minister David Ben-Gurion, he was put in charge of locating sites to become national parks. In a complete turnaround – Janco, the European modernist, had suddenly become the defender of Israel's heritage.

Far ahead of his time, he traveled around the country with his sketchbook looking for sites to protect and stumbled across the abandoned hillside village of Ayn Hawd (now called Ein Hod). Falling in love with the surroundings at the foot of Mount Carmel, Janco established an artist village in Ein Hod in 1953. Incidentally, some Arab residents of Ayn Hawd returned and settled further up the hill but their village wasn't recognized by the state until 1992.

Today, Ein Hod is a popular day trip destination for Israelis with its art galleries and craft shops, as well as being home to the Janco Dada Museum. Founded in 1983, a year before Janco's death in 1984, the Janco Dada Museum houses a small collection of the great artist's work spanning his life. And what a life...

Life in Europe

Janco was born in Bucharest, Romania in 1895 and his artistic talent was discovered early on. In 1915, he moved to Zurich to study architecture. Along with fellow Romanian Tristan Tzara and other artists such as Hugo Ball and Hans Arp, he joined artistic performances at the infamous Cabaret Voltaire. Away from the horrors of the First World War and in response to what was happening elsewhere, these artists formed the avant-garde Dada movement in 1917. Janco created covers for the Dada manifestos and sculpted masks that had a kind of tribal African style. One of the most revolutionary artist movements, Dadaism influenced modern and surrealist art, as well as poetry and later, architecture.

After a brief stay in Paris, Janco returned to Romania in 1922, where he painted classical landscapes and portraits of people, but in his avant-garde style. He eventually opened an architects' office with his brother Jules, and together they designed over 40 buildings. These buildings are examples of the minimalist International style but every house had a touch of abstraction; a triangle here, a round window there.

But by 1940, the persecution of Jews at the hands of the Nazi's Iron Guard was widespread. He witnessed many acts of antisemitism and his artistic publications were banned in Romania, though Janco defined himself as "an artist who is a Jew, rather than a Jewish artist." He visited what was British Mandate Palestine to start preparing his family's move but came back to Bucharest to do a final exhibition. This time Janco wasn't so lucky. He witnessed the Bucharest Pogrom of January 1941, where Jews were trapped and kidnapped in the Choral Temple synagogue. His friend Jacques Costin's brother, Michael Goldschlager, was one of the Jews whose corpse was left hanging on a hook, mocking kosher meat. Janco said these scenes made him a "militant Jew" and were depicted in later paintings and drawings such as *Fascist Genocide*. (His Holocaust art was not well received in Israel in the 1950s, as the general mood at the time was to honor the heroic survivors, not the victims).

Janco in the Middle East

With help from England, Janco, his wife Medi and their two daughters left Romania through Constanta harbour, and arrived in Turkey on 4 February 1941. They made their way through French Syria and Transjordan before arriving in Tel Aviv on 23 February 1941. Following this turmoil, Janco went straight to work and his first job in Israel was as an architect for the Tel Aviv municipality. He also taught art and he had a great influence on local artists such as Reuven Reuben and Joseph Zaritsky.

It was David Ben-Gurion who had the vision to give Janco an important role in the Research and Survey department after the establishment of Israel in 1948. And what a debt Israel owes him. Today, who could imagine Tel Aviv without the old Arabic casbah of Jaffa? Who could imagine Acre without its mosques and minarets?

ONE OF Janco's famous masks from 1917 on display at 'Hey! Did you know that Art does not exist...' (The Sylvio Perlstein Collection: From Dada to Now at the Tel Aviv Museum)

At a heated meeting of the Council for the Preservation of Historic, Architectural and Religious Buildings in Old Jaffa in 1950, Janco said, "The modern city of Tel Aviv is not a pretty sight; indeed, it is ugly. And if there is one lovely spot – why ruin it? The antiquities of Jaffa can awaken within us the sentiments of the past."

Thankfully, much of Old Jaffa was preserved, though the majority of Jaffa's Arab residents had to flee, and during the 1950s Old Jaffa became a retrogressive crime area nicknamed "The Wasteland." Janco wanted to convert Jaffa into an artist colony but his vision couldn't be realized. For much of the rest of his life he turned his attention and energy toward Ein Hod, promoting it as a refuge for artists. He taught art, returned to creating abstract oil paintings and designed ceramic works for public buildings in Haifa.

He received the Israel Prize for his contribution to the country in 1967. Yet today, few Israelis are aware of just how important a role this eccentric, avant-garde artist had on their country. Far ahead of his time, Janco knew the importance of preserving historic architecture and designing buildings in tune with their natural surroundings. More than anything, Janco showed that modern art and cultural heritage are not distant cousins.

Janco summed it up best himself:

"It would seem banal to remind architecture of the existence of a fraternity of arts. We are all aware of this lost sense of unity. The genius of all the great artists was given expression in both art and architecture. So many artists, painters and sculptors were also architects who created the temples and memorials that housed their works."

Modern Israel with its property developers and high-rise towers, could learn much from the life of Janco. In such a small country, where land is sparse, the preservation of its remaining natural environment and historic sites is more important now than ever. Marcel Janco could see this back in the 1950s – that to create a country's future you also need to save its past.

To visit the Janco Dada Museum, see here: www.jancodada.co.il

To visit the Sylvio Perlstein collection "From Dada to Now," go here: www.tamuseum.org.il/en/exhibition/hey-did-you-know-art-does-not-exist/

ONE OF a group of lost ceramic panels depicting Israel's struggle for independence recently found tucked away in the artist's studio in Ein Hod. (Courtesy of the Janco-Dada Museum)

JERUSALEM REPORT

Rebirth of a Community

The Jews of Vinnitsa, who vanished in the 20th century, look toward the future

Daniel Savery Vinnitsa

'THE LAST JEW OF VINNITSA': Ukraine, September 22, 1941, Rosh Hashana

THE JEWISH HERITAGE OF Vinnitsa, three hours' drive south of Kiev, the capital of the modern state of Ukraine, dates to the 16th century. While Jews may have been there earlier, the first record comes from 1552, when a Jew from Vinnitsa paid taxes on 2,000 head of cattle. An 1878 census found that about 15,000 of the 28,000 residents of the town were Jewish, who worshiped in 13 synagogues and were a dominant force in the distilling industry.

Like all Jews in the southern Ukraine, the Jews of Vinnitsa have suffered from pogroms and persecution, from the time of the Cossack Uprising of 1653, when they were massacred by Bogdan Chmeilniki's forces, through to 1905, when a drunken mob raced through the marketplace, targeting Jewish stores and their owners.

But Vinnitsa's darkest day came on September 22, 1941, Rosh Hashana, when 28,000 Jews were lined up and killed by the Nazi Einsatzkommando. The dreadful event was immortalized in a photograph, found years later in America, that shows a man kneeling over a mass grave, a gun to his head. Scribbled on the back are the words, "The Last Jew of Vinnitsa."

The man in the picture has never been identified. But he definitely wasn't the last Jew of Vinnitsa. By 1961, Vinnitsa had become a large industrial town and already 16 percent of the population was Jewish. By 1992, one year after the country gained independence from the Soviet Union, Dmitri Dvorkis, a Jew, was elected mayor, despite anti-Semitic leaflets against him and other Jewish candidates.

The community has been rebuilding. When Stalin came to power, synagogues across Ukraine were either destroyed or closed down and used as theaters, museums or cinemas. During the Holocaust, many synagogues perished with their congregations. But in 1991, a governmental decree ensured restitution of synagogues in Ukraine, and 55 have been returned to local Jewish communities.

But legal recognition of Jewish communal ownership of property is a lengthy and expensive process and reconstruction and rennovation are costly. The former Lifshitz synagogue in Vinnitsa, constructed in 1909, was closed in 1929 and was used by the Vinnitsa Philharmonic Orchestra until 1986. In disrepair, it was handed over to the Vinnitsa Jewish Culture Society and, with aid from the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), some renovations were carried out. It is now used as a community center, but other synagogues in the region are destroyed or derelict.

Each year on Holocaust Memorial Day, Vinnitsa remembers those who died at a monument for children killed in the war. "We don't commemorate the massacre on Rosh Hashana because we don't want it to be a sad festival," says Rabbi Alexander Dukhovy, chief rabbi of the Religious Union for Progressive Judaism in Ukraine and one of 50 rabbis, most of whom represent the Chabad-Lubavitch movement, now active in the former Soviet Republic. "We think it is better to remember on days such as Yom Kippur."

Today, there are over 3,000 members on the rolls of the Vinnista City Jewish Committee (VCJC), the first and largest public Jewish organization in the region, affiliated with the liberal (Reform) movement, and the numbers change as individuals and families continue to discover their Jewish roots. According to the United States Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad, the average age of Jews in Ukraine is 45.The majority of Jews in the Ukraine are native Russian-Ukrainian speakers, and only a few of the elderly still speak Yiddish as their first language.

Aided by the JDC, the VCJC occupies a group of rooms a mile outside the center of the town, which are used for meetings, offices and Shabbat services. Other active liberal organizations in the city include the Tziporim kindergarten group, founded in 1997, which provides Jewish education to some 60 children; the Netzer youth club, which organizes events, discos and trips for teens; and the Yareah women's club, established in 2001, where women study together and learn about Jewish traditions.

At Vinnitsa's Jewish welfare center, Hesed Emuna, some 50 volunteers, including doctors and lawyers, provide medical aid and support for the poor and elderly. Hesed Emuna also works closely with the Repatriation Center, which assists people who lost their homes following the war and works to preserve the names of Jewish Holocaust victims.

The community has a Jewish newspaper, Vinnitsa Jerusalimka, published in Russian. Editor David Tsigelman, 37, was born in Vinnitsa and studied in Moscow and Israel, before returning in 1993. "Developing our Jewish community depends on the number of Jews," he says. "Regrettably, every year the number of Jews decreases."

Michael Hart, a member of the Liberal Jewish Synagogue (LJS) in London who has had extensive contact with the Vinnitsa community, explains, "The Vinnitsa community and those in the surrounding area have enormous challenges to establish and develop Jewish traditions. In recent years, as in so many parts of the former Soviet Union, one of the greatest challenges is emigration, particularly to Israel."

Despite these demographic indicators, Jewish life continues to flourish, due to an increase in the number of rabbis since independence and an increase in people practicing their faith after the many years under Communism, during which all Ukrainians were forbidden to practice their religion in public.

Although they lack Judaica and Jewish literature, the community does have a Torah scroll, donated by the Liberal Jewish Synagogue (LJS) in London. As Vinnitsa's twin congregation, the LJS offers financial support and organizes exchange visits. Since 2003, the United Charities Fund of the LJS has donated 110,000 Ukraine *hryvnia* (U.S. $22,000) to the VCJC.

The VCJC is one of 48 Reform congregations in the Ukraine, serving about 15,000 Jews nationwide. Progressive Judaism is not new to the Ukraine, having been established here in 1826. Rabbi Dukhovny's return to Kiev after his studies in London marked the beginning of a new period in the development of the Progressive movement in the Ukraine. Under his leadership, together with a group of prominent lay leaders, the Progressive movement has developed into one of the most accessible streams of Judaism for post-Soviet Jewry, and the number of Progressive congregations increased quickly from 14 in 1999 to its current number.

Dukhovny admits that he often has difficulties with the Chabad Lubavitch movement, which has more than 100 of the 140 registered Jewish organizations in the country under it's wing. "It's the same as anywhere," he quips. "We love them and they hate us," acknowledging that his Orthodox colleagues do not agree with his views on female rabbis and homosexuality.

He maintains that Reform Judaism plays an important role in the revival of Judaism in Ukraine. "To change tradition you need to know it," he says. "We teach Jewish traditions to our congregations so they can make an informed choice. Liberal Progressive Judaism is not only a set of rules. It's about who you are. So my first question to people is not 'Do you believe in God?' but 'Do you believe in yourself?'"

He explains that the rebirth of Judaism is being manifested in many different ways in Ukraine. "In one of our congregations, we have a 26-year old woman who is writing new music for Jewish liturgy. In Kiev, there are dozens of Jewish schools, musical groups, theaters and art exhibitions preserving our Jewish heritage," he says proudly.

Dukhovny, 57, comes from Kiev; his parents were Holocaust survivors. His mother, who originally came from the shtetl of Ruzhyn, instructed him not to forget his Jewish roots, but he remembers that when he grew up there were thousands of Jews living in the Ukrainian capital, but they had no synagogue. He graduated from the Kiev Polytechnic University in 1973, worked for more than twenty years at the National Academy of Science of Ukraine, then worked for the American Jewish JDC.

When Ukraine achieved independence from the crumbling U.S.S.R. in 1991, the first Reform congregation was founded in Kiev, and Dukhovny was among its earliest members. In 1999, he was ordained as a rabbi at the Leo Baeck College in London.

He is well known for his liberal and universalist positions and was the only one of Ukraine's rabbis to attend the historic December 2004 rally in Kiev's Independence Square that launched the Orange Revolution against corruption and vote-rigging, which eventually brought President Viktor Yushchenko to power.

"I went because it matters to me where my country is going," explains Dukhovny, speaking to The Report at his home in Kiev. "I wasn't there to support a particular candidate, but I supported the main democratic changes in Ukraine. That was my main prayer in 2004."

THOUGH DEMOCRACY MAY have taken hold in Ukraine, it's still an open question whether the rebirth of Ukrainian nationalism has benefited the Jewish population. Ukraine, formerly part of the Soviet Union, is now home to the fourth largest Jewish community in the world, after the United States, Israel and Russia, estimated to be between 250,000 and 425,000.

Before the 2004 elections, Yushchenko's opponents tried to depict him as an anti-Semite. But during the election campaign Yushchenko, who was famously poisoned with dioxin and became seriously ill in September 2004, but survived to win, proclaimed, "We cannot be divided either by the languages we speak, by the faiths we profess or by the political views we choose." And since coming into office, President Yushchenko has taken part in Hanukka celebrations in Kiev, issued a directive to begin the process of restoring several large synagogues and visited Auschwitz, where his father was interned as a Soviet prisoner of war.

Today, less than three years later, Ukraine is once again torn in a political crisis. In April this year, due to suspected corruption within the government, Yushchenko dissolved parliament and called for early elections. Despite the opposition of Yushchenko's arch-rival, Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovych, new elections will be held on September 30.

What happened to the optimism of 2004? Svitlana Stefanovich, a folklore expert at Kiev's Ryl's'kyi Institute of Art Studies, which collects manuscripts and photographs of Ukranian folk music and folklore, says, "I am not disenchanted because I was not particularly enchanted to begin with. What we achieved — freedom of speech, for example — was achieved by the people themselves."

Dukhovny says life is definitely better now for the Jews than it was under the Soviet Union. And he emphasizes that "now there is freedom of culture and freedom of speech. This is the biggest achievement of

the Orange Revolution." But he also adds that in his first term Yushchenko failed to implement many of the promises of the Orange Revolution. "I think his major failings were that there were more words than actions. The major slogan of the Orange Revolution was 'Stop corruption.' Corruption is flourishing today," says Dukhovny. "The main problems that Jewish people in Ukraine face today are political instability and economic poverty."

Ukrainian journalists can now openly criticize the government and there are even a number of Jewish newspapers. All this would have been unthinkable under the Soviet Union. But freedom of speech is not always enough. The majority of Ukrainians still live in poverty. The average pension is around 150 Ukrainian *hryvnia* ($30) per month, while an average salary in Ukraine is about about $200. The cost of living is disproportionately high and gaps between wealthy businessmen and struggling farmers are growing.

In 2001, Transparency International ranked Ukraine as the third most corrupt country in the world. Many Ukrainians still blame the corruption in parliament for their economic problems. Yushchenko, who would like the Ukraine to be more like a Western democracy, sees membership of the European Union as a way to elevate the nation out of poverty and end corruption. His pro-Western views have repeatedly come under attack from Yanukovych, but the president is determined to transform his nation into "a modern pluralist European society" and move away from its Communist past.

COURTESY MIKE LEVY

NEW JEWS IN VINNITSA: (Top) Rabbi Alexander Dukhovy conducts a bar/bat mitzvah ceremony in the town; (Above) two local women display the Torah mantle they made

DESPITE EXPANDED OPPORTUNITIES for Jews to pursue their religious and cultural lives, anti-Semitic incidents continue to occur in Ukraine. Last year, several synagogues, cemeteries and Holocaust memorials were vandalized, particularly in Sevastopol, Dnipropetrovks and Odessa. In August 2005, a group of skinheads assaulted two yeshiva students in Kiev. Two of the assailants were eventually charged with criminal hooliganism, but other violent attacks on rabbis have continued.

Anti-Semitic articles have appeared frequently in small publications, some accusing Jews of lying about the Holocaust. According to Jewish organizations, the Inter-Regional Academy of Personnel Management (known as MAUP) is responsible for 85 percent of all anti-Semitic material published in the country. In June, 2005, MAUP sponsored a one-day conference entitled "Zionism Is the Biggest Threat to Modern Civilization," which was attended by the leader of the U.S.-based Ku Klux Klan, David Duke. In August 2005, the fringe Ukrainian conservative party, associated with MAUP, published an open letter to Yushchenko calling for criminal persecution of hasidic rabbis for "the dissemination in Ukraine of Judeao-Nazi teachings." But despite an extensive campaign, the party failed to win a seat in Parliament. Yushchenko has condemned MAUP many times in recent years, calling on its professors to "stop rousing national hatred."

According to Galina Topchiy, an official in the community, the Jews began to receive threats almost immediately after the revolution. "One caller said they will kick us all out when Yanukovych comes to power," she says. Over the past few years the Brodsky synagogue has been vandalized on a number of occasions; in February 2006, a man stormed into the building brandishing a knife; he was stopped by security guards and arrested.

The U.S. State Department's International Religious Freedom Report for 2006 highlighted a rise in reported instances of vandalism to synagogues, cemeteries and Holocaust memorials across the country last year, with little or no police investigations.

Dukhovny regularly attends interfaith meetings, attended by Christian, Muslim and Jewish leaders, to discuss ways in which different ethnic groups within Ukraine can work together. "The essence of Judaism is to be a personal example to other nations, to be compassionate, just and build peace," he says. "The Jewish community in Ukraine is just beginning to discover its identity in full flourish... This is why we are teaching that Christians and Muslims are our brothers."

These meetings have influenced government policies: On September 23, 2005, Yushchenko issued a decree ordering educational and research institutions at all levels to strengthen teaching about tolerance and inter-denominational understanding.

While there is no progressive synagogue in Kiev itself, Dukhovny dreams that one day his movement will have a physical presence in the capital. "Unless you have a physical presence, then you will always be a marginal movement. I want us to have a property in Kiev that is a center of acceptance, tolerance and pluralism."

And though there is a lot more to be done to establish and maintain Jewish institutions in a community threatened by anti-Semitism, emigration and political instability are still threats, Dukhovny says there is no choice but to move ahead. "The best way to commemorate those Jews who were murdered in Vinnitsa and across the country in 1941," he says, "is not to cry, but to build a real Jewish presence in modern Ukraine."

For more information on Vinnitsa's Jewish community see www.jewish.-vinnitsa.com.

SYNAGOGUE MUSEUM: The Maisel Synagogue, a superb example of Renaissance architecture built in 1590, now serves as an exhibition venue within Prague's Jewish Museum complex

A Precious Legacy

Forty years after the Prague Spring, Leo Pavlat and his museum reflect the reemergence of Czech Jewry

Daniel Savery, Prague

LEO PAVLAT WAS 17 YEARS old when Soviet tanks rolled into Prague in August 1968 and put a brutal end to the brief period of political liberalization that became known as the "Prague Spring." For the next two decades, until the Iron Curtain was ripped down in 1989, the Czech capital's cultural and religious life was virtually silenced by the Communist regime.

Today, 40 years later, Dr. Pavlat is director of Prague's Jewish Museum, the Czech Republic's most popular museum. It is located next to the beautifully-restored Spanish Synagogue, a Moorish-style building completed in 1868, which is part of the museum complex and houses a permanent exhibition on the history of Czech Jews. Indeed the museum is the unifying heart of Prague's Jewish community. The museum maintains four historic synagogues – Maisel, Spanish, Pinkas and Klausen and the Hevra Kadisha hall, as well as the old Jewish Cemetery.

One can easily spend an entire day wandering around the fascinating museum. One of the most intriguing aspects of the museum is that its collections and exhibitions are dispersed in refurbished synagogues around the Jewish Quarter. Sometimes disturbing, often inspiring, the exhibitions provide a unique window into perhaps one of the most precious collections of Judaica left in Europe. In the Pinkas Synagogue, visitors can view pictures drawn by children killed in the Terezin ghetto/concentration camp and read 80,000 names, of about one third of Czechoslovakia's Holocaust victims, inscribed on its walls. The Jewish cemetery dates from the 15th century and is the burial place of Rabbi Judah Loew, the Maharal of Prague, often associated with the Golem folktale. The Maisel Synagogue is a superb example of Renaissance architecture – and has survived fires, pogroms and decades of neglect. In fact, each building has a significant story to tell.

Speaking to The Jerusalem Report in his spacious, modern office, Pavlat, the son of a Holocaust survivor, says that having grown up under Communist repression, he understands the true value of freedom. In the 1970s and 80s, after obtaining a doctorate in journalism, Pavlat's day job was editor of a children's publishing house, but he was also unofficially in charge of underground activities in the Prague Jewish community and one of a circle of young activists who campaigned for democracy by writing for underground magazines and pirate radio stations. These activities brought him to the attention of the secret police and he was forbidden to meet certain people in public and, for years, he couldn't visit Jewish institutions.

"At that time the Jewish Museum was like an island," says the bespectacled, grey-bearded, but youngish-looking Pavlat, speaking English with a gentle Czech accent. "It existed but at the same time it did not exist. It was partly opened for foreigners, but local researchers working here were not allowed to be in touch with their colleagues abroad. There were no books in Hebrew and it was almost impossible to learn the language. When I became more active in the underground movement, I was labeled a Zionist and a subversive element, so I was not allowed access to the Jewish Museum's library. It was strictly controlled by the secret police and was not able to do its job."

PAVLAT'S PERSONAL TALE echoes that of a whole generation of Czech Jews. From 1968 to the end of 1989, he was unable to express his Jewish identity in public because of state anti-Semitism. During this period, the Holocaust could not be mentioned, since this was considered a subversive topic by the secret police and survivors were silenced. After the 1990 "Velvet Revolution" led by playwright and newly-elected president Vaclav Havel, Jewish topics became enormously popular, partly because some Jewish personalities such as Pavlat had helped overthrow communism.

Diplomatic relations with Israel, broken off in 1967 after the Six-Day War, were restored and, in July 1990, Pavlat, who had joined the Foreign Ministry, became the second secretary at the Czech Embassy in Tel Aviv. When he returned to Prague in 1994, he was appointed director of the Jewish Museum. It has become an enormous international success and in 2007 alone, it welcomed 660,000 visitors.

The museum was established in 1906 to preserve artifacts from synagogues that had been recently demolished due to the reconstruction of the Jewish quarter. In a bizarre and tragic irony, it was the Nazi invasion in March 1939 that led to the huge expansion of its collection. Hitler intended the entire Jewish Quarter of the city to become a museum of an "extinct race" and the museum to become a storehouse for over 200,000 objects, books and archival material from all over Central Europe.

The wartime Jewish staff, who had already lost their families and working under constant threat of deportation and death, devoted themselves to preserving this legacy, under the supervision of Dr. Karel Stein (1906-1961). The staff only survived while they could prove that they were 'useful' to the Nazis. The vast majority lost this fight and were deported to Terezin and Auschwitz. However, one specialist who survived was Hana Volavkova, who after the war returned to work at the museum.

After the Nazi defeat, Dr. Volavkova (1904-1985), became the director on behalf of the community. "The existence of the Jewish Museum in Prague was paid for by the lives of nearly all those who worked there during the war," she is quoted in a booklet published after the war. "It was these people – people who were to die without burial – who laid the foundations for the post-war museum." In 1950, ownership was transferred to the Communist regime and it was renamed the State Jewish Museum.

Volavkova remained director, but during the tense atmosphere of the political trials of the 1950s, Jewish themes were suppressed. The only exhibitions held at that time displayed children's drawings from Terezin. When Vilem Benda became director in 1961, the number of exhibitions increased slightly, culminating in the 'Millennium Judaicum Bohemicum' (The Thousand Years of the Jews of Bohemia) exhibition in 1968. During the two decades after the Soviet invasion of August 1968, the museum fell into disrepair and hardly any new exhibitions or renovations were carried out. In 1994, its collections were handed over to the Federation of Jewish Communities (FJC), which serves as an umbrella organization for Jewish institutions in the country.

"The Jewish Museum won fame for having survived the war and the Communist era, but when it was inherited by the Jewish Federation, it was in a very poor state. There was only one computer and everybody was writing on typewriters," says Pavlat. "It was absolutely neglected, no care, no exhibitions. So, of course we wanted to secure what we had – a very precious Jewish legacy."

After 10 years of restoration, today it is one of the most famous Jewish museums in the world.

GHETTO LIFE BEGAN IN BOHEMIA (now the Czech Republic) in 1179, when the church announced that Christians should avoid touching Jews and a set of walls was built in the Stare Mesto area of Prague. By day movement was free, but in the evening and on festivals the gates of the ghetto were locked. In medieval times the Jewish community faced pogroms, banishments and murder allegations. In the 16th century, the ghetto became a center of Jewish mysticism and had a population of around 7,000 inhabitants, among them, Rabbi Loew. The museum will mark the

MUSEUM DIRECTOR: Leo Pavlat's personal tale echoes that of a whole generation of Czech Jews

400th anniversary of his death, September 7, 2009, with a special exhibit.

In 1784, under Emperor Joseph II, the ghetto gates were opened and, by 1850, it was incorporated into the city and renamed Josefov. Before World War II, the Jewish community was one of the largest in Europe – over 92,000 Jews lived in Prague. After mass deportations to the ghetto/concentration camp of Terezin (around 40 miles outside the city) and later to Auschwitz, less than 15,000 Czech Jews remained. Of the vast majority of Czech Jews who were taken to Terezin (or Theresienstadt), 97,297 died, among whom were 15,000 children. Only 132 of those children were known to have survived.

More than a quarter of a million Czechoslovak Jews were murdered in the Holocaust and more than 60 synagogues in the Czech lands were destroyed.

The Soviet Red Army entered Prague to a rapturous reception on May 9, 1945. Not surprisingly, the Communist Party swept the board in the 1946 elections. Under pressure from Stalin, its leaders were soon encouraged to stamp out religious and cultural activity, including Judaism. The regime demolished around 90 synagogues and dozens of Jewish cemeteries were closed down. Nearly half of the country's 15,000 Jews emigrated to Israel after the war, but after 1949 emigration became almost impossible.

The Slansky trial of 1952 had a clearly anti-Jewish character: 11 of 14 accused were Jews and eight among them were executed. Rudolf Slansky, then general secretary of the Czech Communist Party, and 13 others were accused of being 'disloyal' elements and of participating in a Trotskyite-Zionist conspiracy against the Communist parties in central Europe). In subsequent trials hundreds of Jews were sentenced to long-term imprisonment, sent to hard labor without trial and dismissed from their posts. Those Jews who did not manage to emigrate to Israel kept their Jewish identity secret. The Jewish Museum survived the onslaught but became a focus of propaganda, with its exhibits exalting the wartime role of the Communists.

By the mid-1960s, the more obvious anti-Semitism was replaced by insidious state anti-Zionism. Pavlat remembers his anger at the Czech media's biased coverage of the Six-Day War in 1967. "It was very important for me to know the truth about what was happening in Israel," he recalls. "At that time you could find articles in the press not only against Israel, but also against Jews." The media bias against Israel in 1967 made him more interested in finding out what happened to his own family. He says his mother rarely spoke of the Holocaust because of fear of the Communist regime.

GOLEM COUNTRY: Prague's Jewish Cemetery dates from the 15th century and is the burial place of Rabbi Judah Loew, often associated with the Golem folktale

BY 1968 THE POLITICAL TIDE WAS changing and when reform-minded Alexander Dubcek took over the Communist Party leadership in January, he ordered an end to censorship and encouraged Communist reformers to start a broad debate about the political direction of Czechoslovakia. Dubcek wanted to introduce a new kind of communism, "socialism with a human face."

Many young Jews were involved in the events of the Prague Spring and saw it as a way of liberating their country from years of oppression. Young Jews such as Pavlat were now able to ask questions openly about the Holocaust and their Jewish heritage for the first time in their lives and were eager to attend the marches and protests with fellow students.

Then Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev declared that events in Prague were "no longer an internal matter" and a massive Warsaw Pact force was sent in to stamp out the Czech exercise in democracy. Some 90 civilians were shot dead, including an old school friend of Pavlat's named Ivan Laja. According to the American Joint Distribution Committee in Vienna, after the Soviet invasion of 1968, 3,400 Jews left the country. The secret police kept a close eye on the remaining Jewish community and many university lecturers and other Jewish intellectuals lost their jobs. Czechoslovakia became one of the most repressive countries in the Eastern bloc and the Jewish community once again found itself isolated.

Sylvie Wittmann, a lay leader of a Progressive Jewish congregation in Prague called Bejt Simcha, says: "If you went to the Jewish quarter and the Jewish Museum in those days – the guide would say, 'The Jews did, the Jews ate, the Jews felt, the Jews celebrated,' as if the Jews did not exist anymore, as if Hitler had won the war. I thought, 'We Jews are not the stones from the cemetery of the Maharal – we are living people.'" Wittmann, in her 20s in the early 1980s, witnessed this attitude while working in the tourism industry.

Nevertheless, in the 1980s Western interest in Prague's Jewish legacy was growing. In 1983-1985 the museum held its largest foreign exhibition entitled 'Precious Legacy' in cities across the United States and Canada. The Communists had no idea how big the impact of the exhibition would be. It set new attendance records for Judaic-themed exhibitions and inspired people to travel to Prague once more. Also, the reforms of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev were being broadcast all over the world and Communist attitudes were starting to change throughout Europe.

In 1986, Wittmann, who had set up a business called Wittmann Tours, began leading tours of Terezin and Josefov. "The Prague Jewish community had nearly vanished as a result of the Nazis and 40 years of Communist rule," she says, "and my aspiration was to bring the remnants of Czech Jewry back to the abandoned synagogues." Wittmann was born into a Jewish family in northern Bohemia in 1956 and although she lived under the Communist era, she always held onto her Jewish identity. "I have to say honestly that anything I ever started, started with anger," says Wittmann, who studied theology before leading tours. "I began to see countless numbers of mainly American and English Jews coming here, with no guides, no explanation and no religious services."

However, by 1989 a new revolutionary spirit was sweeping across Eastern Europe and in November, just seven days after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Prague students armed with candles and flowers confronted baton-wielding police. For six weeks Prague was in the throes of the "Velvet Revolution" – a series of strikes, pickets and celebrations that culminated in the election of Vaclav Havel to the presidency on December 29, 1989.

Immediately after the "Velvet Revolution," the long process of restitution of Jewish property began and the Federation of Jewish Communities assembled around 1,000 records of communal Jewish property. The list was incorporated into a government bill. In 1992, the Pinkas Synagogue reopened as a permanent exhibition site of the Jewish Museum. And after almost a quarter of a century of interrupted work, the task of inscribing the walls of the synagogue with over 80,000 names of Czechoslovak Jews who perished in the Holocaust, was completed. The Maisel Synagogue, which dates from 1590, was restored in 1995, followed by the Spanish Synagogue (built in 1868) in 1998. These synagogues are now part of the Jewish museum, located in Josefov, which in post-Communist times has become a fashionable up-market neighborhood lined with designer shops. Ironically, it seems the old ghetto is now hot property.

Today Jewish tourists from all over Europe, the United States and Israel, flock to Prague, hungry to discover the city's Jewish history. "The majority of our visitors are foreigners," says Pavlat, "but at the same time we have developed programs for our local audience because I think we owe them," referring to residents of Prague, Jews and non-Jews, who helped keep the Jewish museum alive by financial help and community support. "In 1996 we established the educational and cultural center with 8,000 students a year, studying courses on Jewish culture, anti-Semitism, Jewish tradition and religion. We have a program called "Neighbors who Disappeared" to help people trace and find Jewish friends or neighbors and find out what happened to them. They can learn about the history of local Jewish communities that do not exist anymore."

THE FJC STATES THAT THERE ARE over 3,000 registered members of Jewish communities in the Czech Republic (in 1993 Czechoslovakia peacefully split into the independent Czech Republic and Slovakia), of whom 1,600 reside in Prague. Finding exact figures for the total Jewish population is difficult, due to decades of intermarrying and emigration. Thomas Kraus, FJC executive director, says, "There are a number of various Jewish 'secular' organizations which fall under the auspices of the Federation, including the Union of Jewish Youth, a branch of the World Union of Jewish Students, sporting clubs Maccabi and Hakoach, the Women's Zionist Organization and the Terezin Initiative, (a non-profit organization that supports and pursues research into the history of the Nazi's "Final Solution" in the Czech territories of Bohemia and Moravia). Altogether, these institutions comprise approximately another 2,000 people. It is estimated that there are an additional 10,000 to 15,000 unregistered Jews in the country."

There are three regularly functioning Orthodox synagogues in Prague: the Altneuschul (Orthodox), the High Synagogue (modern Orthodox) and the Jubilee Synagogue on Jeruzalemska street (also known as the Jerusalem Synagogue). In addition, Chabad also holds services at its center on Parizska Street, in the heart of Josefov.

There have been disputes within the community over control of the Altneuschul (Old-New synagogue, dating from 1270), the oldest functioning synagogue in Europe. The tension began in 2004, when Rabbi Karol Sidon, the chief rabbi of the Czech Republic, was dismissed by Tomas Jelinek, the head of the Prague Jewish community executive board. This infuriated those community members who admired Sidon as a former anti-Communist dissident, credited by many with helping to rebuild the Jewish community after 1989. Jelinek, who is secular, and Sidon, who is Orthodox, had contrasting visions for the community's future as well as personal differences. They took their dispute to a rabbinical court in Israel, which backed Jelinek. Sidon, who had been presiding over services for more than a decade at the Altneuschul, was moved to the more modern High Synagogue.

Prague's two liberal communities – Bejt Simcha and the ZLU (Jewish Liberal Union) are much smaller and there is no Progressive synagogue. Occupying a modest apartment building, the Bejt Simcha community center offers educational programs, including Hebrew lessons, and holds Shabbat eve services in its library. Except for a small Magen David at the entrance, Bejt Simcha looks like any other apartment building in Prague's new city. Inside, it also houses a private Jewish school, for children aged 4-16. More than 60 children take part in activities at the school, which offers a pluralistic view of the Jewish traditions. Bejt Simcha has over 100 members and publishes a monthly magazine Maskil, which is distributed to all the Jewish communities and other institutions all over the Czech Republic. ZLU is a smaller congregation of around 80 people and rents a room off the old town square on Dlouha Street for Shabbat eve services. There are also two Lauder Orthodox schools in the city, an elementary school and a secondary school, with approximately 130 students. The main functioning synagogues also run summer and evening classes catering for all ages.

Anti-Semitism is not seen as a problem in the new Czech Republic. Last November a right-wing extremist group linked to neo-Nazis planned a march through the Jewish quarter. The proposed march was opposed by Jewish leaders in Prague, including Pavlat, and was eventually banned by City Hall.

There were five reported anti-Semitic incidents in the Czech Republic last year, including the overturning of 23 tombstones in a Jewish cemetery in Pisek, south of Prague. A 2000 law outlaws Holocaust denial and provides for prison sentences of six months to three years for public denial, questioning, approval of or attempts to justify the Nazi genocide.

"Generally speaking anti-Semitism is on the margin of society," says Pavlat. "You cannot find texts or verbal expressions of anti-Semitism at political levels. Of course there are groups of neo-Nazis and there are extreme leftists that attack Zionism using anti-Semitic stereotypes, but these people are purely extremists."

Pavlat believes that, 40 years after the historic events of the Prague Spring, the Jewish community shares an unbreakable bond. "This is a community of common faith," he says. "This is a community, which survived the Shoah and this memory is a very important part of Jewish identity here in Prague." He pauses for a moment. "During the Communist regime Jewish topics were taboo. Many people had a distorted view of Jews, so we aimed to improve this. I would say that we have succeeded." ●

A Golem into Gold

I was shamelessly tucking into a delicious dish called the "Rabbi's Pocket of Beef" in U Golema, a bizarre themed-restaurant in Prague, when a group of young Italian tourists walked in with flashing cameras. Opened in 1967, U Golema took its name from perhaps the most famous folk story to come out of any Jewish ghetto – the Golem of Prague.

Inside the restaurant is a giant effigy of the golem. As I watch the tour group snap photographs of each other standing next to it, I can't help but assume that their interest has more to do with the "Gollum" character from the hugely popular movie versions of J.R.R. Tolkien's "The Lord of the Ring's" than a simple Jewish folk tale.

The golem is Prague's very own Mickey Mouse. In souvenir shops all over the city you can now buy golem mugs, golem T-shirts, numerous golem books and miniature golem figurines.

The golem is usually linked to Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel (1525-1609), known as the Maharal of Prague. Loew is buried in Prague's Old Jewish Cemetery, behind the Pinkas Synagogue. He was an enigmatic teacher, philosopher and leader who became one of the greatest universalist thinkers of the 16th century. Actually, whether Loew created the golem legend or not is a bit of a mystery.

My interest in this folk tale began when Rabbi Alexandra Wright of the Liberal Jewish Synagogue in London told me to "Google the Golem." I did just that and began to discover just how a story that originated in the ghetto turned into a global golem phenomenon.

The original story goes that Loew made a creature out of clay from the banks of the Vltava River to protect the Jews of Prague from pogroms and attacks. One of the legends surrounding the golem is that the remains of the creature created by Loew lay in the attic of the Staranova Synagogue, also known as Altneuschul (the Old-New Synagogue) in Josefov, the former Jewish ghetto. Completed around 1270, it is the oldest functioning synagogue in Europe and is still used by Prague's Orthodox community.

AVI KATZ

It is certainly an atmospheric building, with its narrow Gothic windows and medieval vaulted ceilings. During my visit there, Danuse Stocesova, the synagogue's official tour tersely says that, "The golem is its own legend. We don't know if the golem existed or not."

Leo Pavlat, Director of the Jewish Museum in Prague, is much more opinionated, "Rabbi Loew has nothing to do with the Golem," he tells me. "You cannot find a single word about an artificial human being. It is just the product of romanticism."

When I ask him about the legend, Benjamin Kuras, Czech playwright, broadcaster and author of "As Golems Go: Rabbi Loew, the Reluctant Czech," notes that, "The narrative is proven to have been a post-Loew creation. There is actually no proof that a golem, or any mechanism that we would today probably describe as a robot, actually existed in his time, let alone created by him. But the story remains an endless source of inspiration."

The Golem, Kuras quips, "is a fascinating national legend that's good for business." So it may be a simple folk tale from the ghetto, but the people of Prague certainly know how to turn the golem into gold.

***Daniel Savery** Prague*

The Kingdom of the Shuk

"Toto, I don't think we're in the shuk anymore," I think to myself.

This chilly early summer evening in the Jerusalem's semi-outdoor Mahane Yehuda shuk (market), has transported me somewhere unexpected from a very familiar place. Since moving to Jerusalem three months ago, I have become a temporary member of the shuk community and it has become a nearly-daily part of my life. I have become accustomed to its music and rhythm, to the vendors hollering *"tutim, tutim – shalosh shekel kilo"* ("strawberries, strawberries three shekels a kilo"). Even the air has become familiar, that pungent, spicy and sour smell from the spice shops and the confectionery sugar that seems to dust me as if I were a cake as I walk by the bakers. By now, I say hello to my favorite stall owners, and fierce allegiances have been built over this short period of time.

That is all during the day. Most evenings, the shuk seems to rest, gaining energy for the next day. But all that changes on summer Sunday nights. During the day, the semi-transparent white and green canvas ceiling shields the shoppers from the sun. But at

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city to city routes, which Neil Lewis, CEO of Property Secrets, says will, "as a rule, experience steadier demand as cities do not belong in the seasonal or lifestyle category - people live and work in cities. This is why we believe long-term property investors should ignore coastal developments and head for cities, where demand for property is domestically driven".

Dennis Onstenk, director of Tropea-based InCalabria, adds: "I believe markets that are primarily attractive due to low pricing will suffer more than markets that offer climate, lifestyle and culture as key selling points. The latter markets attract a more wealthy, or mature, client base that may be happy to use indirect flights or decide to fly less often, but stay for longer periods."

VOX POPS

Which areas will be less impacted by airline closures?

The markets and airline routes we believe will buck the trend will be emerging markets - especially in Central and Eastern Europe. Since countries such as Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland and Romania joined the EU, the demand for flights to their key cities has risen drastically - increased FDI has meant more business related travel and more companies may choose to relocate distribution centres to the region, to take advantage of lower wages and strong transport infrastructure. I can see no reason why these countries should not continue to become increasingly important within Europe and thus the airlines that serve these countries should see demand steadily grow.

Neil Lewis, Property Secrets

Going green

Another new trend, as people become increasingly alert to fuel surcharges and the environmental issues surrounding carbon dioxide pollution, is the possibility of activity from more environmentally-conscious buyers.

> ***Continental Europe will continue to have relatively cheap flights, and also more ways of getting there - such as via motorways, buses and high-speed train networks***
>
> Dennis Onstenk, InCalabria

A number of companies, such as Someplace Else, have already introduced carbon off-setting schemes and companies in nearby destinations, such as France, have been actively promoting the appeal of alternative methods of transport.

"The European buyer of French property is able to make use of the high speed train service or to drive to their holiday home, so is more protected than other overseas buyers," argues Trisha Mason, founder and managing director of VEF French Property. "France's high speed train network makes it possible to get down to the south of France from, say, London in five hours - which beats any time taken to check in at airports, go through security, queue, wait for take off, disembark and wait for luggage."

With the development of Railteam, a cooperation between TGV (Train à Grande Vitesse), ICE (Inter-City-Express) and Eurostar trains between France, Germany, UK, Netherlands, Belgium, Austria and Switzerland, high-speed rail travel around the Continent is set to become even easier.

In addition, Alistair Powell, CEO of Seven Continent Investment, argues that the impact of low-cost airlines may have been over-emphasised: "I have always been dubious about low cost airlines and a correlation to property purchases. I don't think that an investor buying multiple units in European destinations is going to travel on a low cost airline. The comfort factor is not there and by the time you have added on everything extra (tax, priority boarding, allocated seats, hold luggage, food and drink on board), as well as the cost of travelling from the airport 20 miles away from the town, it actually costs more than flying with a national carrier."

Not all doom and gloom

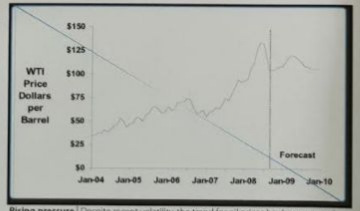
Clearly, then, the picture isn't wholly negative. Traditional second home markets with well-established scheduled and charter flight routes are unlikely to suffer in the same way as newer, up and coming destinations. Rising fuel costs are likely to impact less on short-haul destinations and places accessible by ferry, rail and by car than locations dependent on newly introduced air routes.

Onstenk says: "The inevitable fuel price increases over the long-term will make continental short and medium range destinations more attractive as exotic long distance destinations will be too expensive to be used regularly by the vast majority of second home buyers. Continental Europe will continue to have relatively cheaper flights but buyers from the continent will also have increasingly more ways of getting there, such as motorways, buses and high speed trains."

As an example, Mark Bingham, MD of Owner Invest, notes: "Although the numbers dipped slightly for passengers from France and Germany, visitors to Malaga airport from Ireland, Holland, Norway, Sweden and Finland are up. Malaga has also added New York to its roster, adding 20,000+ passengers through the airport."

In fact, for those European markets that have traditionally relied on European buyers, the rising costs of long-haul routes from the region can ironically be seen as a positive.

Adam Gale, managing director of Costa del Sol-based Duchy Estates, comments, "This is possibly the best news we've had to help kick-start the faltering Spanish property market. We have observed people play a waiting game to see, firstly, how safe their incomes are and, secondly, how low house prices are going to dip both domestically and in Spain. But the cost of long haul travel will probably end up making the decision for them and those waiting on the sidelines will flock to start buying once more."



Rising pressure | Despite recent volatility, the trend for oil prices has been upward, placing increased price pressure on airlines across the world

VOX POPS

How have airline closures impacted access to the Caribbean?

We feel the recent collapse of airlines such as XL won't impact the Caribbean significantly. The Caribbean islands are still attractive to property investors and the make up of the islands, in particular St Lucia, is changing. New developments and international brands, such as The Tides Sugar Beach, are coming into the island and as a result it is drawing a sophisticated, independent visitor. Also, the addition of five star resorts has attracted more US visitors, with an increase of American carriers to St Lucia. Therefore, there is still a very positive feeling for the Caribbean.

Marco Bonini, Prestigious Properties

VOX POPS

What is the expected impact of airline closures on how buyers will choose markets?

Peripheral resort developments that are dependent on secondary airports are most likely to be affected as the loss of one or two popular carriers to their region could have devastating effects - especially if national airports are not easily accessible. Buying a property where the nearest airport is now a long drive away, makes the property not only impractical for short visits for the owner, it also makes it far harder to rent out. Those accessible by other means of transport (eg trains) and those in the relative proximity of main regional airports that could offer alternative connections to, and from, the property may well benefit

James Vassallo, Tigne Point (Malta)

airlines operating direct flights to Halifax, and because of this, there has been minimal impact in terms of international demand on the property market in the Canadian Atlantic province."

For agents, the lesson seems to be that, even if an airline closes or shuts down routes, look at the wider picture, as one airline doesn't make or break a region. To illustrate the point, speaking about the closure of XL, Marco Bonini, of Turks and Caicos-based real estate brokerage Prestigious Properties, says: "Recent research reflects that, since the beginning of this year, XL really only brought in a small minority of passengers to St Lucia - 4,381 out of a total of 58,260."

Drawing on the positives

In addition, there is also a lot of positive airline activity not receiving the same level of coverage. Low-cost carriers such as Ryanair, easyJet and Flybe have been crucial in establishing certain property markets, and this looks set to continue as the airlines adapt to the future. For instance, Ryanair are now offering a new direct service to Agadir, Morocco from Stansted and a similar service is due to be introduced by easyJet in the coming months. These new flights, coupled with King Mohammed's Vision 2010 and government investment of €10bn in tourism infrastructure will increase interest in Morocco's burgeoning property market.

Passenger numbers have led to German airline Lufthansa launching a direct route between Dusseldorf and Miami, and Emirates to launch a daily service between Dubai and Cyprus to accommodate Dubai-based buyers purchasing in the European country.

Pegasus Airlines, Turkey's second largest airline, is reported to be in talks to buy more Boeing aircraft to facilitate new routes, and Turkish Airlines CEO Temel Kotil has stated that the airline is sticking to its prediction of passenger growth of 20%, and sales of $4.5 billion, for 2008.

The US market could also be boosted if Ryanair CEO Michael O'Leary launches a low-cost transatlantic carrier in the next three years. "If aircraft fleet prices collapse, it is a real possibility," he said recently. "There may be the opportunity to buy a fleet of long-haul aircraft cheaply next year." He said the new airline would probably use European hubs like Stansted, Frankfurt-Hahn and Rome-Fiumicino.

As an aside, for developers and agents, one factor to consider will be the rising cost of arranging viewing trips for potential clients. The average viewing trip costs the agent around £300, and many have been offering them to people at property shows for £30. While Howell doesn't think viewing trips will disappear, he argues the cost for potential buyers will change: "I think what we'll see is that the average viewing trip will cost over £150. I still think that's reasonable - you have to ask yourself, if the client isn't prepared to spend £150 pounds to view a property then surely the agent shouldn't be wasting his or her time dealing with them."

Surveying the market, though, Jonty Crossick, director of Ready2invest, concludes: "What is happening at present is inconsequential and not relevant to the property market because you cannot predict what will happen in the next three to six months time. If you are investing in property overseas, you look at the bigger, longer term picture."

> ***The closure of Zoom was disappointing but there are other airlines operating here, so there has been minimal impact in this Canadian Atlantic province***
>
> Kilmeny Fane-Saunders, Second Home Nova Scotia

So it seems events in the aviation industry are not all bad for the property sector. But one thing is for sure, as airports and airlines adapt to current market trends, overseas property companies will need to keep a closer eye on the skies to stay ahead of the game. opp

Speaking at the Vacation Ownership Investment Conference, held in Florida in October, Jean-Claude Baumgarten, president of the World Travel and Tourism Council, acknowledged that "we live in a world full of clouds", but he also identified a number of positives for the travel industry.

One such is rising tourism from new markets: "Tourism from China, for example, is expected to come on strongly in the years ahead. Last year saw 42m Chinese people going overseas for tourism purposes - the Chinese are very interested, for example, in visiting Africa - and the BRICs as a whole are gaining strength."

While he expects the next year to continue to be challenging, the medium to long-term prospects for the industry are stronger. "At WTC we feel 2009 will be a tough year but we strongly feel that, in 2010, things will really start to improve".

The key challenge for the travel industry surrounds the levels of disposable income individuals will have when the markets recover - and how much of a priority travel and tourism will be for them. In this regard, his one fear was that governments, needing to boost revenues, will look at increased taxation of the travel industry - a move the WTTC will campaign against. "We are a resilient industry. Governments will need money and we are a potential victim in terms of taxes and surcharges. However, we will be actively campaigning to prevent us being overburdened."

FLYBE UNCOVERED

Paris

A magical masterpiece

The Louvre has dominated central Paris since the 12th century. Originally built as a fortress, it was transformed into a sumptuous palace with all the latest Gothic comforts by Charles V. For centuries it was a work in progress, as a succession of monarchs tried to leave their mark. In 1793 the Museum Central des Arts opened to the public and gradually the art collections spread to take over the rest of the building. Former French President François Mitterrand added the famous glass pyramid, designed by Chinese-American architect IM Pei, which opened in 1989.

Inside, the building is a celebration of classic and contemporary art. And if you think it looks familiar, it's because it featured in the *Da Vinci Code* film, as it houses the Mona Lisa, perhaps the most viewed painting in the world.

FLY

FLYBE HAS REGULAR FLIGHTS TO PARIS FROM BELFAST, BIRMINGHAM, CARDIFF, EDINBURGH, EXETER, MANCHESTER, NORWICH AND SOUTHAMPTON

www.flybe.com

Geneva

Gateway to the pistes

The city of Geneva is ideally placed for a number of major ski resorts, and is considered one of Europe's premiere winter-sports destinations.

Just one hour's drive from Geneva Airport, via the Arve valley where Switzerland meets France, lies the French ski resort of Chamonix – a mountain Mecca for skiers and part of the Ski Pass Mont Blanc Area, with 143 individual pistes.

At 15,767 feet, Mont Blanc is Europe's highest summit and its peak can be viewed from 100 kilometres away. Chamonix boasts 152 kilometres of ski runs, with pistes above 2,500 metres and skiing and snowboarding is assured throughout the season. The appropriate ski-lift pass will allow you to ski and snowboard in the other resorts of Argentière, Combloux, Cordon, Le Tour, Les Contamines, Les Houches, Megève, Passy Plaine Joux, Samoens and St Gervais Mont-Blanc.

According to the World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO), the area around Chamonix welcomes 2.5 million visitors each year. It was the venue for the first-ever Winter Olympics back in 1924 and today there are ski runs for all levels, from beginner to expert. Other activities in the area include rafting, mountain biking and climbing. There is an indoor climbing wall in Les Houches, and Chamonix has an ice skating rink and sports centre with two large swimming pools. In and around the main resort there are a number of restaurants, bars and cafés, as well as go-carting and other activities for children.

FLY

FLYBE HAS REGULAR FLIGHTS TO GENEVA FROM BIRMINGHAM, EXETER, ISLE OF MAN, JERSEY, NEWQUAY, NORWICH AND SOUTHAMPTON

Exeter

Chip off the old block

This potato field is set in the rolling, pastoral landscape of the Exe Valley, near to the beautiful cathedral city of Exeter.

The city sits on the east side of the river Exe, which winds its way through some 45 miles of woodland, farmland, peaceful villages and bustling market towns to reach the sea at Exmouth.

Exeter is one of the liveliest spots in the south-west, with a selection of excellent pubs, cafes and restaurants alongside the canal.

Exeter also makes a great base to explore the surrounding countryside, including Dartmoor National Park and an array of unspoilt beaches.

And if you like your potatoes as chips, enjoy them with some delicious fresh fish at the Fish Shed, Dart's Farm, Topsham (tel: 01392 87820) – the best fish and chip shop in the valley!

FLYBE HAS REGULAR FLIGHTS TO EXETER FROM ABERDEEN, ALICANTE, AMSTERDAM, AVIGNON, BELFAST, BERGERAC, BREST, CHAMBERY, DUBLIN, EDINBURGH, FARO, GENEVA, GLASGOW, GUERNSEY, JERSEY, LEEDS, MALAGA, MANCHESTER, NEWCASTLE, NICE, NORWICH, PALMA, PARIS, RENNES AND SALZBURG

easy rider

CHARLEY BOORMAN captured the world's imagination last year when he and Ewan McGregor rode their motorbikes from John o'Groats to Cape Town. But, as we found out, this adventurer's journey is only just beginning...

WORDS DAN SAVERY PICTURES GETTY, REX

Charley Boorman picks up the phone. "Can I call you back in half an hour?" he asks. "I'm just having a coffee with my dad and we don't get the chance very often."

Charley's dad is film director John Boorman, of *Deliverance* (1972), *Excalibur* (1981) and *The Emerald Forest* (1985) fame. With movies in his blood, going into the film business was a natural step for Charley, and he acted in all of the above films and, more recently, *The Bunker*. But the fact that father and son don't get enough time together at the moment is due to Charley's new passion – for adventure. He has spent much of the last four years on the road with best pal and Hollywood star, Ewan McGregor.

The two met in 1997 on the set of *The Serpent's Kiss* and, bonded by their love of motorbikes, instantly hit it off. Fuelled by that shared interest, as well as a desire to travel and help disadvantaged children, last year Charley and Ewan embarked on a gruelling journey from the north of Scotland to the southern tip of Africa, crossing some of the most troubled countries on earth. Documented in a hit TV series, *Long Way Down*, and a best-selling book of the same name, the trip was a test of their stamina – and friendship.

On the way, Charley and Ewan rode their BMW R1200 GS Adventure bikes across mud, sand, grass and just about every other kind of terrain. Their bikes took them 15,000 miles across two continents, a journey punctuated by several wheelies by Charley – much to the delight of the children they passed.

He says fondly, "I've always loved wheelies. The guy who got me into motorbikes when I was nine years old used to do stonking wheelies across the fields. I thought, 'That's what I want to do! I don't want to learn how to read, I don't want to learn how to write, I just want to learn how to do wheelies!'"

Highlights of Charley and Ewan's travels include unforgettable experiences such as nearly being trampled by an elephant, seeing wild gorillas in Rwanda, and falling deeply in love with Ethiopia.

BELOW: EWAN AND CHARLEY VISIT ROBIN HOUSE AT THE START OF LONG WAY DOWN; OPPOSITE TOP: EWAN AND CHARLEY ON THEIR FIRST TRIP, LONG WAY ROUND

"It's an amazing country. It was like going back 300 years," says Charley.

And these weren't the only high points. "There were lots of drop-dead, slap-in-the-face moments. I remember being in Tanzania – that's real Africa, the Africa you imagine in your head. It was nearly sunset, and I stopped at the top of a hill, and Ewan pulled up beside me. The sky was starting to go orange, and in the distance we could see some zebra. I looked at it all and started laughing. Ewan said, 'What are you laughing at?' I said, 'We rode here!'"

The long and winding road

But inevitably there were moments when Ewan and Charley fell out. "There were days that weren't as good as others," says Charley. "It's all about talking. If something's annoying you, then you've got to talk about it and not let it build up inside.

"The bad moments are when you're tired. It's three or four o'clock in the afternoon, you're knackered, the road is hard, and you're in a bad mood. The bike in front is annoying you because it's kicking out lots of dust, so you start grumbling and mumbling into your helmet. But then you stop, eat a cereal bar and start laughing again."

And being away from home comforts for such a long time took its toll. Charley's philosophy is to "think Gucci" when roughing it. "The one thing you want to be is comfortable at night," he says. "I used to sometimes daydream about being in my tent, because it had a lovely sleeping bag."

Some of the saddest moments of the trip were when Ewan and Charley visited places affected by violence and genocide. "We stumbled across a village in northern Kenya where 27 children had been killed in their school. And you think, 'How can someone do that?' The problem is that these things happen all over the world, and we seem to keep making the same mistakes again and again. I don't understand human nature."

All in a good cause

Impressively, Long Way Down raised more than £550,000 for UNICEF, Riders for Health, >

"THE GUY WHO GOT ME INTO MOTORBIKES USED TO DO STONKING WHEELIES ACROSS THE FIELDS. I THOUGHT, 'THAT'S WHAT I WANT TO DO!'"

CHAS: HELP AT HAND

PHOTO: MALE HAMPTON

LINDA, ONE OF THE CARE TEAM AT ROBIN HOUSE, HAS FUN WITH THE CHILDREN

The Children's Hospice Association Scotland (CHAS) is a charity that provides hospice services for children with terminal conditions. It runs two hospices: Rachel House – Scotland's first children's hospice – in Kinross, and Robin House in Balloch, which opened in 2005. Each hospice provides support for up to 200 families every year. Although CHAS services are free, each year it costs the charity almost £5m to run the hospices.

To find out more about CHAS, call 0131 444 1900 or visit www.chas.org.uk

and the Children's Hospice Association Scotland (CHAS). Ewan is a UNICEF Ambassador, and Charley has also been a key campaigner for the organisation since Long Way Round, Ewan and Charley's first big trip together in 2004. Ewan is also a patron of CHAS and over the years has raised well over £10 million for the charity, which has helped it build Robin House, a hospice for terminally-ill children in Balloch, overlooking Loch Lomond. Charley and Ewan visited Robin House at the start of Long Way Down.

"My involvement with CHAS started because of Ewan," says Charley. "I lost my sister to cancer, so I understood what it was like to lose someone, but to lose a child? I don't know how people cope. What's beautiful with CHAS is that they offer people the chance to build memories with that child.

"I remember when my sister was dying, my first daughter had just been born, and I was very lucky that she met my firstborn. She only held her once, but then sadly slipped away. I know how important it was to me for my child to have that contact with my sister, even though it was only for a few moments. When I got involved with Robin House those feelings were very strong for me, so I understood completely how the parents felt."

LONG WAY ROUND LTD

AT THE END OF LONG WAY DOWN, CHARLEY AND EWAN AUCTIONED OFF THEIR GEAR FOR CHARITY

> "I KNEW WHAT IT WAS LIKE TO LOSE SOMEONE, BUT A CHILD? I DON'T KNOW HOW PEOPLE COPE"

At the moment, there are only two CHAS hospices, and Charley would love to see more open. "Robin House has been built with real care and attention to what the kids need," he says. "But far beyond the setting of the place are the people who work there. They are just incredible. It must be so hard to see children slipping away all the time and helping to deal with the parents, but when you're there, it doesn't feel depressing, it feels uplifting... There's a really positive, electric buzz about the place."

It's clear that Charley and Ewan genuinely empathise with the people they encounter, and Charley puts this down to being a parent – he has two daughters by his wife, Olivia. "When you have children, things change a little bit," he says. "I suppose you stop thinking about yourself as much and start thinking about your children."

After Long Way Round, Charley competed in the Dakar Rally, and he reveals that he is hoping to do another solo journey soon.

"I'm trying to get a TV project together for myself at the moment, which will involve some travelling and a bit of madness," he says. "I'm looking for more adrenalin and more fun. I've got something planned, but we're in negotiations at the moment."

Since Ewan and Charley completed Long Way Down, there has been much talk of the pair doing a follow-up. Of course, 2008 has seen even more violence in Kenya, and Ewan and Charley are keen to raise more money. One idea was Long Way Up – a trip from South America to Alaska. However, both men are keen to continue their work for UNICEF and have mentioned a fundraising project called Long Way To Go – focusing on the Aids epidemic in Africa.

It seems the journey is far from over.

JOURNEY'S END: CHARLEY AND EWAN REACH CAPE TOWN – THE LAST STOP ON THEIR LONG WAY DOWN TRIP

The last word

JK ROWLING is the most successful author of her, or probably any other, generation. Now, after finishing her meteoric **Harry Potter series of books**, the world awaits her next move

WORDS BY DAN SAVERY PICTURES BY GETTY

Board any train or flight in the UK and it won't be long before you see a middle-aged businessman reading a Harry Potter book. Whether you're a Harry Potter fan or not, there is no doubting the universal appeal of JK Rowling's work. In the age of 24-hour news, the Internet and reality TV, Joanne Rowling has somehow broken through and made Britain, and indeed the world, excited about reading books again.

But how did she do it? After all, there's no lack of fantasy novels or indeed books about wizards around. So what makes Harry Potter so special? The fan reviews of the final book – *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* – say it all: "JK Rowling amazes me," says Annie Gibbons, 14. "In my opinion this is truly one of the best books I have ever read," Tom Miller, 23. "Even though it took eight hours to read I was never bored with the story," Rachel Esposito, 13. "I was nine when the first book came out, so Harry is part of my life," Saskia, 19.

Whatever the reasons, Harry Potter has captured the hearts and minds of a generation. This summer, *Harry Potter And The Deathly Hallows* broke all sales records by selling over three million copies on its first weekend in the UK. In the weeks preceding its release, there was much speculation in the press and from Internet bloggers on what would be the last word in the book.

In a TV interview with JK Rowling, Jonathon Ross asked her if the word was 'scar.' Of course, she kept the last word a secret and was infuriated when some American newspapers decided to publish reviews that gave away the ending. "It shows complete disregard of the wishes of literally millions of readers, particularly children," she said at the time. But she must have realised that Harry Potter ceased being specifically for children a long time ago.

Many of the early Potter fans are now of university age (even the boy who played Potter in the films, Daniel Radcliffe, is now 18 years old), and the themes covered in the series became increasingly dark and adult with each instalment. Unlike other children's characters, such as Enid Blyton's Famous Five, Harry Potter does actually get older with each story and has to deal with love, responsibility and bereavement, as we all do.

Finishing the series was a great achievement for Joanne. There were seven books in total, some over 760 pages long! "Actually finishing it was the most remarkable feeling I've ever had," she says. "I was in a hotel room on my own, sobbing my heart out. I downed half a bottle of champagne in one and went home with mascara all over my face. It was really tough."

To say she had mixed feelings about finishing her final Harry Potter book is an understatement. She says she felt euphoric and devastated at the >

ABOVE: JK ROWLING TALKS WITH THE QUEEN AT A CHILDREN'S LITERACY PARTY
RIGHT: RECEIVING AN HONORARY LAW DEGREE FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN
BELOW RIGHT: TWO EXCITED BOYS RIDE ON THE HOGWARTS EXPRESS

same time. "I've been working on it over what I sincerely hope will prove to have been the most turbulent part of my life and that was the constant, and I worked on it so hard for so long," she says. "It's going to leave a massive gap."

But there is life after Harry. At this year's Edinburgh Book Festival, fellow author Ian Rankin hinted that Joanne's next project could be a crime novel. But later he said this was "a joke that got out of hand".

There is also speculation that the author may turn her hand to another fantasy project or even a biography. However, her literary agent, Christopher Little, says all speculation remains just that. "JK Rowling is taking a well-earned break following the English language publication of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*," says Emma Schlesinger, speaking on behalf of Christopher Little, "and there are no firm plans as yet as to what her next book may be."

Joanne has been characteristically coy about her future plans, but has said that she wants to write something "completely different," adding: "I can take my time. And the idea of just wandering off to a café with a notebook and writing and seeing where it takes me for a while is just bliss."

She has been writing like this since she was five or six years old. Her first story, called *Rabbit*, was filled with interesting characters, such as a large bee called Miss Bee.

Joanne Rowling was born on July 31st 1965 in Chipping Sodbury, Gloucestershire. She has one >

younger sister, Di, who is a successful lawyer. Her parents were Londoners and met on a train travelling from King's Cross Station. No wonder, then, that Joanne thinks Kings Cross is a romantic place.

She left school in 1983 and went to study French at the University of Exeter. After leaving university she worked in London for Amnesty International, the organisation that campaigns against human rights abuse worldwide.

Then, in 1990, while on a train from Manchester to London, Joanne had the idea for Harry Potter. "To my immense frustration, I didn't have a functioning pen with me," she says, " and I was too shy to ask for one. I spent four hours thinking about what Hogwarts would be like – the most interesting train journey I've ever taken. By the time I got off at King's Cross, many of the characters in the books had already been invented." She began writing the *Philosopher's Stone* that evening.

At the end of 1990, Joanne and her family were devastated by the death of her mother. Nine months later, she decided to get away from it all and moved to Portugal to teach English. There she married and had her daughter, Jessica. The marriage didn't work out, and on her return to the UK in 1994 with Jessica, Joanne settled in Edinburgh, finally finished the book and posted it to some literary agents. The second agent, Christopher Little, spotted the potential and asked to see the rest of the manuscript. "It was far and away the best letter I had ever received in my life, and it was only two sentences long," she says. Many publishers rejected the book, however, until 1996 when Bloomsbury made an offer to publish it and suggested Joanne add a middle initial to her name.She chose that of her grandmother, Kathleen, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Today, JK Rowling lives in Aberfeldy, in Perthshire, with her husband, Dr Neil Murray and her three children. Joanne has always wanted to keep her children out of the media spotlight and recently fought a legal battle against *The Sunday Express* for publishing a photo of her son. In a statement to the press, Joanne and Neil said: "We see no legitimate reason why, as in this case, David, who was less than two years of age at the time, should have his photograph taken and then published in the press. We take his, and that of his siblings, privacy and safety very seriously."

International fame does come at a price. Lord Byron once said that fame was "the advantage of being known by people of whom you yourself know nothing, and for whom you care as little."

And fame was definitely a shock to Joanne. "I imagined being a famous writer would be like being Jane Austen," she says. "I didn't think they'd rake through my bins, I didn't expect to be photographed on the beach through long lenses. I never dreamt it would impact my daughter's life negatively, which at times it has. It would be churlish to say there's nothing good about being famous; to have a total stranger walk up to you in Safeways and say a number of nice things about your work does put a spring in your step."

Of course, the money helps too. *The Sunday Times* recently estimated Joanne's personal fortune to be £545 million – over a billion US dollars – making her the first woman to become a billionaire from writing. This fortune has been boosted by the merchandise and film rights.

Earlier this year, the fifth film – *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* – was released, leaving two more to come. You can't help thinking that perhaps the films may have influenced Joanne's later books, as the characters are no longer left to the imagination alone. JRR Tolkien was never alive to see his *Lord of the Rings* trilogy brought to life, but JK Rowling has witnessed her characters on screen at the same time as writing the books.

Like Tolkien, Joanne took a lot of her inspiration from ancient words. 'Dumbledore' is an Old English word meaning bumble bee, and 'Hedwig' is a medieval saint. When she was younger she loved CS Lewis' *Narnia* books but says her favourite writer of all time is Jane Austen.

You can be sure that the name JK Rowling will go down in literary legend with the likes of JRR Tolkien and Jane Austen. And fans everywhere are waiting to see what Joanne does next...

WHAT THEY'VE SAID ABOUT JK

"JK Rowling is very descriptive in her writing. She gives an illustrator a lot to work with. Each story is packed full of rich visual descriptions of the atmosphere, the mood, the setting, and all the different creatures and people. She makes it easy for me. The images just develop as I sketch and retrace until it feels right and matches her vision."
Illustrator Mary GrandPré

"JK Rowling's monumental, spellbinding epic, 10 years in the making, is deeply rooted in traditional literature and Hollywood sagas — from the Greek myths to Dickens and Tolkien to Star Wars."
Michiko Kakutani, New York Times

"Jo Rowling set out a sumptuous seven-course meal, carefully prepared, beautifully cooked, and lovingly served out. The kids and adults who fell in love with the series (I among them) savoured every mouthful, from the appetizer to the dessert."
Stephen King.

"I spent four hours thinking about what Hogwarts would be like... By the time I got off at King's Cross many of the characters in the books had already been invented"

JK: IN HER OWN WORDS

On the idea of Harry Potter
"It was after a weekend's flat-hunting, when I was travelling back to London on my own on a crowded train, that the idea for Harry Potter simply fell into my head"

On the death of her mother
"It was a terrible time. My father, Di and I were devastated... I remember feeling as though there was a paving slab pressing down upon my chest, a literal pain in my heart"

On success
"I don't feel like quite such a waste of space any more"

On Harry Potter merchandise
"If I could have stopped all merchandising I would have done. And twice a year I sit down with Warner Brothers and we have conversations about merchandising and I can only say you should have seen some of the stuff that was stopped!"

On happiness
"I'm happier now I would say than I've ever been in my life"

On her critics
"I am immensely proud of Harry, and I'm never going to disown it, and I promise I am never, ever, ever going to apologise for it. Never. Because I am proud of it and I will defend Harry against all comers"

SEVENTH HEAVEN: THE FINAL HARRY POTTER BOOK BROKE ALL SALES RECORDS IN THE UK AND THE UNITED STATES

BOLLYWOOD PRINCESS

Last year **SHILPA SHETTY** was the focus of global controversy as a contestant on *Celebrity Big Brother*. But, speaking exclusively to us, the Bollywood superstar says she has no regrets...

WORDS BY DAN SAVERY PICTURES BY GETTY, REX

Shilpa Shetty became a household name in the UK last year for all the wrong reasons. Already a well-known Bollywood actress in India, Shilpa hit the headlines during *Celebrity Big Brother*, after becoming the alleged target of racist bullying by three of her fellow housemates.

Trouble in the house escalated when Jade Goody, Jo O'Meara and Danielle Lloyd mocked Shilpa's Indian accent and called her names behind her back.

Outside the house these events spiralled out of control when angry protestors marched in Bihar, India, while Gordon Brown was on a goodwill visit. Eventually, Carphone Warehouse withdrew their sponsorship from the show, Channel 4 received a record 40,000 complaints and its bosses had to make a series of high-profile apologies.

In the end, Shilpa won the contest, winning 63 per cent of the public vote.

Speaking exclusively to *Flybe Uncovered* from an airport lounge in Germany, Shilpa remains philosophical about the whole experience. "I believe that whatever happened at that point in time happened for the best and for a reason," she says. "I have no regrets whatsoever. There's been a lot to learn from my experience. I knew I was a strong person, but I didn't realise I was *that* strong, *that* resilient and that I could be so calm."

For better or worse, the reality show catapulted Shilpa into the media spotlight. After her win she met Tony Blair, the Queen, and was even offered a role in *EastEnders* (she turned it down). She also appeared on the cover of the first issue of *OK!* magazine in India, although some newspapers accused her of riding the 'racism wave' to make money.

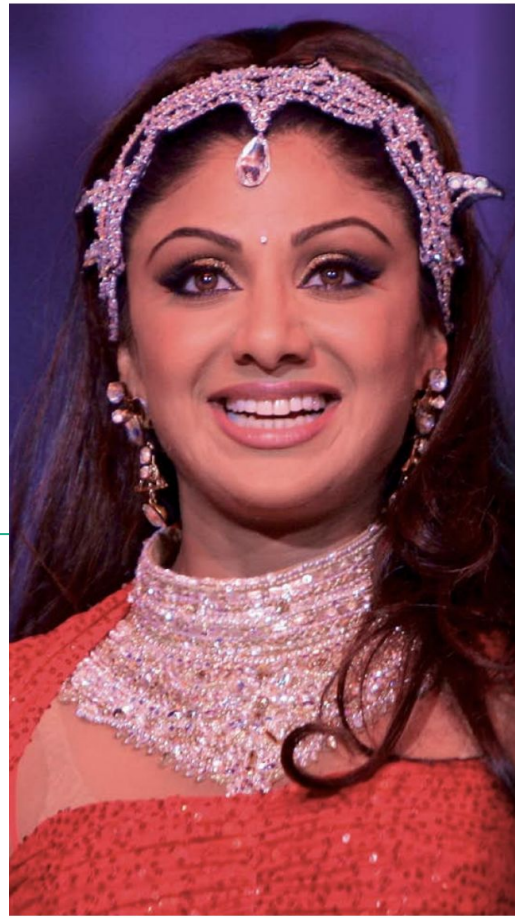
But Shilpa was already a star in her own right. At 32, she is a Bollywood veteran and has starred in nearly 50 films, landing her first leading role in 1994. She recently starred in *Life In A... Metro*, the first Indian film to receive a premiere in Leicester Square, and spent most of the winter touring the UK with *Miss Bollywood*, a stage show set in London in the run-up to the 2012 Olympics.

So how does the stage compare to film? "Theatre is very, very different from film," she says. "It's very challenging. Being on stage is practically like doing a movie from beginning to end. It is extremely exciting, because sometimes you get things wrong. We're all human beings, and you try to make it perfect every time, but you can't."

In recent years Bollywood has boomed in Britain. The UK has the largest audience for Indian cinema outside India, and in 2007 the prestigious International Indian Film Academy Awards – which attract a global audience of 500 million people in 110 countries – were held in exotic Yorkshire!

Shilpa is not surprised at Bollywood's success here. "Firstly, there are a lot of Asians here. Bollywood is doing well because it is not just about song and dance any more. It's about cultural realities, and audiences are more open to entertainment in any form and any language."

NO REGRETS: SHILPA WAVES TO THE CROWDS AFTER WINNING *CELEBRITY BIG BROTHER* LAST YEAR



Despite her experience in the *Big Brother* house, it hasn't put her off the UK. She is particularly fond of Birmingham, Manchester and London, and loves going shopping on Carnaby Street. "The British people are very warm and extremely nice to me, which gives me a reason to come back," she says. "London is a real hub for all the different cultures coming together; it has become a melting pot."

Shilpa thinks the fact that many organisations are encouraging greater cross-cultural interaction in the UK bodes well for the future, but believes it is important for people to keep their cultural roots. "Whether you are based in London, Germany or wherever, as long as you respect where you come from, where you are and who others are, then there's no culture clash," she says. "After all, variety is the spice of life."

> "AS LONG AS YOU RESPECT WHERE YOU COME FROM, WHERE YOU ARE AND WHO OTHERS ARE, THEN THERE'S NO CULTURE CLASH"

There is no doubt that Shilpa is proud of her Indian heritage. She was born in Tamil Nadu in 1975 and now lives in Mumbai. She is the eldest daughter of Surendra and Sunanda Shetty, both manufacturers, and has a younger sister, Shamita, also a Bollywood actress. Shilpa's native language is Tulu, although she can speak ten other languages, including English, Hindi, Gujarati and French.

"I had a very happy and normal childhood," says Shilpa. "I came from a middle-class family, my parents were both working, and when we were children we were always encouraged to work and do good deeds. And we were taught what is right and what is wrong, but the decision was left up to us. I think that's what helped us become stronger people."

Perhaps her family taught her the importance of laughter, too – throughout the interview Shilpa frequently bursts into giggles.

BOLLYWOOD STYLE IN BIRMINGHAM

If there is one British city that has taken Bollywood to its bosom, it's Birmingham. Here, Bollywood is not just the latest dance craze, but a fun form of entertainment that keeps on growing...

For those looking to get a piece of the action, learning to dance like a Bollywood actor or actress is now easier than ever. Reena Tailor's Bollywood Dreams Dance Academy in Birmingham started with one class on a Saturday afternoon in 2002. It now trains more than 200 students in Birmingham, and boasts 16 classes a week all over the West Midlands.

"It's very fashionable at the moment," says Reena. "Because the movies are so popular here, obviously it's reflected on the dance floors, and every year we're getting bigger and bigger. The age of our students ranges from age three all the way to 65!"

For more details, contact Bollywood Dreams Dance: 0845 226 8210 or see www.bollywooddreamsdance.com

Birmingham is famous for its Indian restaurants, and now it has a Bollywood theme bar and restaurant, Peppers. **Call 0121 633 4411; www.peppers-uk.com**

ABOVE: SHILPA PERFORMING IN SHEFFIELD LAST YEAR
BELOW: WINNING A SPECIAL AWARD AT THE BOLLYWOOD OSCARS

"Laughing is for free and you don't have to pay taxes on it," she says. "I think when you are happy and smiling you can increase your positive energy."

But Shilpa does have a serious side and certainly hasn't forgotten her roots. Last year she launched the Shilpa Shetty Foundation, which raises awareness of the AIDS virus in Mumbai. "I think it is important to know your social responsibilities. India is affected quite badly by this virus, so I took up the cause of HIV and AIDS in my country. Everywhere I go >

THE LOW-DOWN ON BOLLYWOOD

- Bollywood is the largest film industry in the world, producing more than 1,000 films a year.
- Though Bollywood's annual revenue is only $1.3bn (compared to Hollywood's $57bn), last year 3.6bn tickets were sold to Bollywood films, while Hollywood sold just 2.6bn.
- The name 'Bollywood' is a combination of the first letter of the top studio centre Bombay (now Mumbai) and Hollywood.
- The first full-length Indian film was *Raja Harishchandra*, made in 1913.
- Bollywood film music is called 'filmi', after a Hindi word that means 'of films'.
- The most expensive Bollywood film ever will be the epic *Mahabharata*, which is being made this year with estimated costs of up to a jaw-dropping $30m.
- Introduced in 1954, the Filmfare Awards is the most prominent film event given for Hindi films and is sometimes referred to as the 'Indian Oscars'.
- The term 'Bollywood' is often incorrectly used to refer to the whole of Indian cinema, but it is only a part of India's film industry.
- The UK has the largest audience for Indian cinema outside India. In 2005, a record 74 Indian films were released in the UK, compared to 61 home-grown productions.

I try to talk about it and make people aware that it is important to be more educated on the topic. And this means more empathy than apathy."

Although it is often called an emerging market, India is still one of the poorest countries in the world. In 2006, UNAIDS (the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS) estimated that 5.7 million people in India were living with HIV. However, Shilpa denies that the spread of the disease has anything to do with the country's caste system, which dictates a person's occupation and living conditions. "I don't really think that is a problem any more," she says. "The younger generation is far more educated and more aware than the previous generation. We are growing more accepting, which is a very good thing."

But attitudes take a long time to change and, for some reason, Shilpa seems to attract controversy. Appearing at an AIDS awareness event last April, Hollywood heartthrob Richard Gere embraced and kissed Shilpa's face a number of times. The public display of affection, considered taboo in India, caused an outraged Indian judge to order Shilpa's arrest, although the case was later suspended. "That was blown out of proportion. It was not such a big thing or so obscene for people to overreact in such a manner."

Despite all the controversy, Shilpa has managed to keep some dignity. In fact, last year the Bollywood star received an honorary doctorate from Leeds Metropolitan University and won the Rajiv Gandhi National Quality Award, an accolade usually reserved for ex-prime ministers. "For someone my age to be bestowed with such an honour was quite humbling," she says. "It was really amazing that they thought I was worthy of such an award."

PRETTY WOMAN: RICHARD GERE KISSES SHILPA AT AN AIDS BENEFIT IN INDIA

"SOME PEOPLE HAVE ONLY SEEN ME ON A REALITY TV SHOW. BUT THIS IS WHAT I REALLY DO"

Next on Shilpa's agenda is to shoot her first Bollywood film since appearing on *Celebrity Big Brother*. She is also writing a cookery book, *Soul Curry*, and is also rumoured to be starring alongside Keanu Reeves in a new adaptation of *Hanuman*, a film about the Hindu god. On top of that, she is promoting her new DVD, *Shilpa's Yoga*, made by her own production company, S2 Global Production. She has also become the latest star to launch her own fragrance, S2, and is even planning to open a restaurant in the UK. With so many new ventures, it seems as if she is frantically trying to forget *Celebrity Big Brother*.

"Some people have only seen me on a reality TV show," she says, talking about her acting career, "but this is what I really do."

Whether Shilpa can establish herself as a star in the UK remains to be seen. "I never wanted to be an actress, I never thought I could be one, but I always liked to perform in front of an audience, I always liked to dance..." then she pauses. "Oh dear, I think I'm going to miss my flight." The interview ends abruptly and Shilpa rushes off into the distance.

In case you're worried, she made the flight.

WHAT THEY SAID ABOUT SHILPA

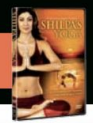
"No, I'm not a racist, but I accept I made racist comments. I don't see people for the colour that they are, or where they come from ... It's my own fault for not knowing enough about other people's cultures."
Jade Goody, after Celebrity Big Brother

"I want Britain to be seen as a country of fairness and tolerance. Anything detracting from this I condemn."
Gordon Brown, commenting on the alleged racism

"I believe no one can insult you without your permission. Shilpa Shetty has paid the price for trying to desperately seek the approval of the West."
Bollywood film-maker Mahesh Bhatt

"Shilpa Shetty is a courageous and wonderful woman who deserves high praise and support for her singular leadership against HIV/AIDS. I assure you, I have utmost respect for her, and she knows this. Of course, I've felt terrible that she should carry a burden that is no fault of hers."
Richard Gere, after his infamous kiss with Shilpa

***Shilpa's Yoga* is out now on DVD and is available from all good retailers**



LET IT SNOW

It's time to dust off those skis, pack up the thermals and plan a winter break to the snowy slopes

WORDS DAN SAVERY PICTURES GETTY IMAGES

FLY Flybe has regular flights to Geneva from Birmingham, Exeter, Isle of Man, Jersey, Newquay, Norwich and Southampton

While sun-worshippers live for the summer, others are just as fanatical about snow and can't wait for winter to arrive. Skiers will tell you there is nothing better than gliding through crisp snow down a mountain slope.

In Europe, winter sports enthusiasts are spoilt for choice. There are hundreds of ski areas to choose from and you don't have to be a world-class downhill racer to enjoy a winter break, as most resorts now provide activities for beginners and non-skiers.

Skiing has a long history; skis were originally used in northern Europe as a means of transport. What started out as a way to get around grew in popularity as a sport by the 1900s. If you're a novice skiier, it's best to take lessons rather than attempting to brave a ski slope on your own the first time. A competent instructor can show you and your family the proper techniques while also ensuring that you start on a slope that's appropriate for your skill level.

Majestic Mont Blanc

For their sheer size and range, the French Alps attract the most visitors. One of the few serious contenders for the title of "world's most famous ski resort," is Chamonix, Mont Blanc. It has the world's biggest lift-served vertical drop of 2,807 metres (9,209 feet) and one of the world's longest runs through the Vallée Blanche. Chamonix is 80 kilometres (50 miles) south-east of Geneva, the nearest airport.

Mont Blanc is Europe's greatest summit and for years it had a dangerous reputation. In the 18th century many climbers on expeditions died trying to reach its peak. Today, you can tour the summit by helicopter, but most visitors climb the mountain by cable car. There are several exhilarating cable car and train routes up the slopes around Chamonix. None are cheap, but a view of Mont Blanc close up is an unforgettable experience.

In 1924, Chamonix hosted the first-ever Winter Olympics, but although it hasn't held the games since, its facilities have kept up with the times. If you are not a keen skier, there is still plenty to do. There are innumerable walking possibilities, casinos, gourmet restaurants, health and spa clubs, and if you really want a bird's-eye view of Chamonix, you could try paragliding.

It is also home to the Musée Alpin, housed >

in the historic Chamonix-Palace, which retraces the history of Alpine life.

The nearby resort of Argentière is set at the head of the valley of Chamonix. It's the starting point for the cable car up to Les Grands Montets, a skiing area famous for its steep and demanding slopes. Within Argentière resort there are 16 ski runs, extending over a total of 30 kilometres (19 miles) and featuring 11 lifts.

One of a raft of purpose-built resorts that sprang up in the 1960s, Flaine, situated in a bowl on the edge of the Grand Massif, is experiencing a long-overdue resurgence. Its nearest airport is Geneva (44 miles), but it is also within striking distance of Chambéry (84 miles). Flaine is one of the highest resorts in Europe and was originally designed by architect Marcel Breuer in 1968. Flaine also has a wealth of non-skiing alternatives for which it has become famous, including the Renault Ice Driving school, the snowmobiling operation and the paragliding and hang-gliding schools. The resort is now hot property and giant developer Intrawest, (who built Whistler and Mont Tremblant resorts in Canada), are building their latest complex in Flaine. When finished in 2012, it will be the Alp's largest new resort – Flaine Montsoleil.

Britain's number one female skier Chemmy Alcott likes Flaine so much that she bought a property there. "Like Val d'Isere in France it's very English," says Chemmy. "But for someone like me who is always travelling, it's nice to hear familiar accents."

Into the Three Valleys

Slightly further south is the airport of Chambéry. This is an extremely useful airport for winter sports enthusiasts as it is just 60 miles from the Trois-Vallées ski area. Les Trois-Vallées boasts the largest interconnecting network of ski runs in the world. In other words, this is ski heaven!

Méribel is tucked away down its own private wooded valley, but is worth the trip as it is a fashionable and stylish resort. The neighbouring resort of Courchevel is set on three levels, the lowest (Courchevel 1550) is considered to be the most beautiful and is made up almost entirely of chalets.

Further up the valley is La Plagne, one of the biggest ski and snowboarding areas in the world. La Plagne makes a great destination for a family ski holiday or for a mixed-ability group. The Vanoise Express cable car links La >

FLY Flybe has regular flights to Chambéry from Birmingham (from 15th December, Saturdays), Exeter (from 15th December, Saturdays), Norwich (from 15th December) and Southampton (from 15th December, four weekly)

Plagne to Les Arcs to form the combined ski area Paradiski. This winter, La Plagne will be open for skiing from December 10th, with the Paradiski ski area from December 23rd.

In some ways La Plagne is the ultimate Alpine resort. It has an Olympic bobsleigh piste, open to public and professionals alike, ice rinks, youth clubs, dog-sled rides, swimming pools, fitness centres, squash courts, an indoor climbing wall, go-karting, paint ball, bowling and even natural waterfalls to practise ice climbing. It is also home to the Jean-Luc Cretier slalom stadium, purpose-built and floodlit for night skiing.

A touch of Swiss bliss

Crossing the border into Switzerland and heading east of Lake Geneva, the chic resort of Gstaad is part of a thriving ski circuit, south of Berne, the Swiss capital.

Tree-lined slopes provide gentle, undulating skiing, while mountain lakes and glaciers provide the backdrop. There are 85 kilometres (53 miles) of groomed slopes and the four valleys of the Bernese Oberland include at least six other resorts, which are accessible from Gstaad by a system of gondolas, mountain railroads and 70 lifts that transport a whopping 50,000 skiers per hour. The season at Gstaad runs from December to mid-April, but the Diablerets Glacier also offers skiing during the summer months.

If you really want a white-knuckle ride, then you could also take part in the relatively new sport of heli-skiing (which is off-trail, downhill skiing only reached by a helicopter).

Non-skiing attractions include curling, ballooning, swimming and tennis. Nearby, Switzerland's first casino and the 13th century Château de Chillon are worthy attractions at Montreux, on the banks of Lake Geneva.

Also in Switzerland, Les Collons lies in the Thyon ski area, two hours from Geneva. Less of a resort and more of a village, Les Collons has an obvious edge over neighbouring settlements.

"All the other villages face north and have a view looking down to the Rhône Valley," says Simon Malster of Investors in Property, who specialise in ski properties. "But Les Collons is much higher with some wonderful uncrowded pistes and a view of Switzerland's most famous mountain, the Matterhorn."

If you are flying into Berne, then pay a visit to the very pretty, historic, year-round resort of Grindelwald. Located just 75 kilometres (50 miles) from Berne's airport, it is the largest on the Jungfrau region pass, which includes Wengen and Murren.

As well as excellent skiing for all abilities, Grindelwald has around 50 kilometres (30 miles) of winter footpaths to explore, a variety of toboggan runs, a ski and snowboard school, museums and a cinema. It's the perfect resort for everyone, from families to couples. >

FLY Flybe has regular flights to Berne from Birmingham (from 2nd February, Saturdays) and Southampton (from 15th December).

Austria's winter wonderland

Some people say Austria is the perfect country for ski holidays. Of the total area of Austria, only about a quarter can be considered low lying and as the Alps cover most of the country, there can be no worries about finding new terrain. You can fly into Salzburg Amadeus Mozart Airport and enter a winter wonderland. Salzburgerland is full of world-class ski resorts such as Flachau (pictured here), Kleinarl, Wagrain and Mühlbach. Each of these towns is filled with fairytale country houses and hotels that offer skiing from your front door.

One of the fastest-growing resorts in Salzburgerland is Zell am See. Located 80 kilometres (50 miles) from Salzburg, it is a small town originally founded by monks on the shores of Lake Zell. Today it has a car-free centre with a wide range of shops, restaurants and off-slope activity options. Zell offers year-round skiing thanks to its bus link to the glacier of neighbouring Kaprun. Advanced skiers can choose from several long, medium-steep black runs descending through the forest back down to the resort. Zell has a reputation for good off-piste powder when conditions are right.

In terms of property, prices tend to be much cheaper here than France and Switzerland. For example, it is still possible to find two-bedroom apartments in quiet rural area on the outskirts of Salzburg for less than £140,000, (see www.investorsinproperty.com).

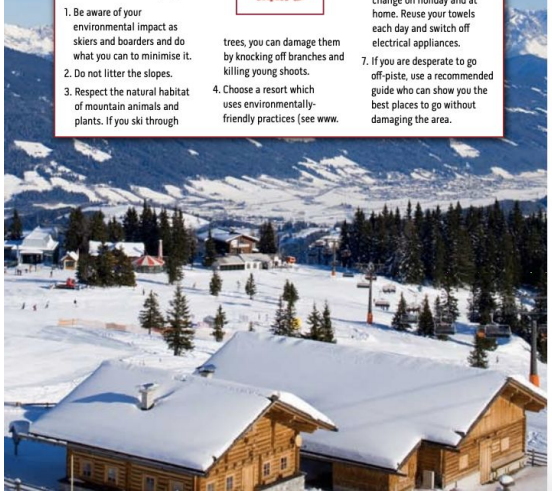
Austrians are very protective of their tourist industry and do their best to keep improving their resorts, but without encroaching too much on the surrounding environment.

FLY Flybe has flights to Salzburg from Exeter (from 15th December, Saturdays) and Southampton (from 15th December, Saturdays)

Responsible skiing

Top tips from the Ski Club of Great Britain's *Respect the Mountain* campaign

1. Be aware of your environmental impact as skiers and boarders and do what you can to minimise it.
2. Do not litter the slopes.
3. Respect the natural habitat of mountain animals and plants. If you ski through trees, you can damage them by knocking off branches and killing young shoots.
4. Choose a resort which uses environmentally-friendly practices (see www.respectthemountain.com).
5. Encourage tour operators to adopt green policies.
6. Do your bit to reduce climate change on holiday and at home. Reuse your towels each day and switch off electrical appliances.
7. If you are desperate to go off-piste, use a recommended guide who can show you the best places to go without damaging the area.



PROPERTY FOCUS

CHALET CHIC
Where: Vercorin, Switzerland.
What: These three luxurious chalets in Vercorin have three bedrooms (one en-suite), set on 500 square metre plots.
Price: £380,000
Contact: Alpine Property Investments: www.alpinepropertyinvestments.co.uk

ALPINE APARTMENTS
Where: Tignes, France
What: Stunning two, three and four-bedroom apartments at Le Nevada, with heated pool, Jacuzzi, sauna, gym and steam rooms in one of the most snow-sure regions in the French Alps.
Price: €354,000 (£240,660)
Contact: MGM: www.mgm-constructeur.com

SUPERB SKI HOMES
Where: Les Collons, Switzerland
What: Fantastic three-bed and four-bed apartments with spa.
Price: £315,000
Contact: Alpine Property Investments: www.alpinepropertyinvestments.co.uk

TOPGEAR

So, you've booked your winter break – now all you need is to get kitted up. Here's our selection of some of the best clothing and equipment you'll need to give you that cutting edge on the slopes...

ESSENTIALS MUST BUYS

1. **Just for women**
The Roxy range from Quicksilver includes poles, skis and boots designed for women. www.ellis-brigham.com
2. **Smokin' sunglasses**
Tag Heuer Sport Vision ski shades. Six colours, three shapes and five lenses. £111. www.tagheuer.com
3. **Mind your head**
Protect your head with this fabulous Giro Helmet G10 MX Matt Sepia. £109.99. Filarinskis: 02392 499599 or order on 02392 476100; www.filarinskis.co.uk
4. **Toasted toes**
Dry out your boots and heat them up with a pair of £25.95 Therm-ic Boot Warmers. Snow and Rock. 0845 1001000
5. **Ladies ski helmet**
High impact Giro Encore Signature Model Gretchen Bleiler for ladies. Filarinskis: 02392 499599 or order on 02392 476100; www.filarinskis.co.uk
6. **Keep your hands warm**
Dakine Sequoia GT Silver Glove with nose and goggle wipe thumb panels. £30. Filarinskis: 02392 499599 or order on 02392 476100; www.filarinskis.co.uk
7. **Watch this space**
Swiss-made water-resistant Oakley Orbital Brushed Sunburst Red Blade 2 watch. £227.50. Filarinskis: 02392 499599 or order on 02392 476100; www.filarinskis.co.uk

Hidden Holland

There's more to Holland than Amsterdam. We took a trip to the nearby cities of The Hague and Delft and uncovered a wealth of cultural delights

WORDS DAN SAVERY PICTURES GETTY, HOLLAND TOURIST BOARD

Think of Holland and often Amsterdam comes to mind. Many foreign visitors rarely venture further than the capital city – famous for its canals, cyclists, relaxing cafés and liberal attitude towards sex, drugs and just about everything else. But there's more to Holland than Amsterdam. Explore further afield and you'll discover that Holland is overflowing with culture, architecture, art, museums, restaurants, theatres and antique shops. We spent a jam-packed weekend uncovering some of Holland's hidden delights in The Hague and Delft.

Landing at Amsterdam's Schipol Airport – Europe's fourth largest and one of the busiest in the world – early on a Saturday morning, it's easy to see why Holland is the perfect destination for a short break. The flight from the UK takes just 45 minutes – less than a bus journey across London! The charming city of The Hague is a 35-minute train journey from the airport and, like most places on earth, the public transport system in Holland is a joy compared to the UK. The trains generally arrive on time, and as you pass windmills and fields, you can relax in peace.

Harmony in The Hague

Peace, of course, is what The Hague ('Den Haag' in Dutch) is famous for. It took its first steps towards being an international 'city of peace, justice and security' in 1899, when it held the world's first peace conference. After the League of Nations was set up, the city became the seat of the Permanent Court of International Justice, which was replaced by the UN's International Court of Justice (ICJ) after the Second World War. In recent years The Hague was the setting for former dictator Slobodan Miloševic's war crimes trial – and where he died before the verdict was given.

Appropriately, our first experience of The Hague is a political one. The tram into the city centre is delayed for 10 minutes while a group of Turkish protesters march by, carrying placards.

"The Hague is a city of many faces," says Rianne Ojeh from the Dutch tourist board. "It has a charming and historic centre with all kinds of entertainment, including world-class shopping centres, theatres and unique restaurants."

The third-largest city in the Netherlands, The Hague has more than 475,000 inhabitants. In spite of its size, there is an urban legend that regards the city as little more than a big village.

It certainly has a quiet, tranquil atmosphere, and in terms of traffic there is more chance of getting run over by a bicycle than a car! However, as we tour The Hague we learn that change is afoot: three new skyscrapers are being built in the centre, which will transform the city's skyline by the next decade.

BELOW: THE KEIZERSGRACHT CANAL IN AMSTERDAM; NO WONDER IT'S OFTEN CALLED 'THE VENICE OF THE NORTH'

"A charming and historic centre with all kinds of entertainment, including world-class shopping"

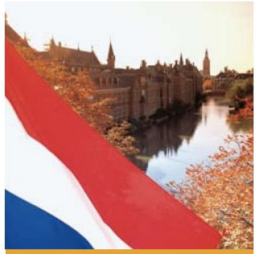
It already has a number of impressive buildings, including several palaces. The most famous of these is the Peace Palace, which opened its gates in 1913. This grand building houses the International Court of Justice, and calls to mind the prison in the film, *The Shawshank Redemption*. Outside the palace gates, a lone Buddhist protestor meditates, reminding visitors about human rights abuses in China.

Bizarrely, given that it is not the capital, The Hague is home to the Dutch government and the royal family. On the other side of the city, the Huis ten Bosch Palace is where Queen Beatrix, who has reigned since 1980, resides. The first king of the Netherlands in 1806 was Napoleon's brother, Louis Bonaparte, but the present monarchy was founded in 1813 when William I took the throne.

Perhaps one of the biggest attractions in The Hague is the Mauritshuis, sometimes called 'the greatest of the small museums and the smallest of the great museums.' Set in a lakeside 17th-century urban palace, it houses world-renowned works by Rembrandt, Rubens and Vermeer. The most famous painting is Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, which attracts visitors from all over the world. The Dutch *Mona Lisa*, the painting was the inspiration for the Hollywood film of the same name, starring Scarlett Johansson and Colin Firth.

ABOVE: TUCKING INTO AN INDONESIAN MEAL
TOP: THE PEACE PALACE, HOME OF THE ICJ

LEFT: YOU ARE NEVER FAR FROM A WINDMILL IN HOLLAND
BELOW: THE SEAT OF PARLIAMENT AT THE HAGUE



"Three new skyscrapers are being built, which will transform the city's skyline"

Scheveningen, overlooking the North Sea, is just a 15-minute tram ride from the centre of The Hague. This seaside town has a number of hotels, a large Las Vegas-style casino and a pier, making it not too dissimilar to Brighton's seafront. In summer, the long sandy beach attracts people from all over Holland.

Once sightseeing has worked up an appetite, try one of The Hague's fabulous restaurants. If you like spicy food, head to Garoeda for a delicious Indonesian *rijsttafel* (rice table), with several dishes to sample. For a spectacular setting, Binnen on The Hague's seafront is hard to beat. Designed as a 1970s Buddha lounge, Binnen combines contemporary cuisine with funky music and great views.

As the sun goes down, The Hague springs to life and there are some lively nightspots to check out. Leopold's bar, just around the corner from the Mauritshuis Museum, serves an array of Dutch and Belgian beers, and plays a mix of cheesy pop and house tunes to keep you dancing into the early hours.

The Hague is considered to be a leading city in dance and each autumn it holds the International Holland Dance Festival. One of the most unusual venues in the city is De Regentes. This fantastic theatre is set in a former swimming baths, which gives it incredible acoustics. Although dancing is not my forte, I did enjoy watching the modern dance performance by the Cathy Sharpe Ensemble. This was followed by an interactive >

choreography game where we, the audience, got the chance to compose a dance. "This is not Art with a capital 'A'," explains Dirk Dumon, who created the game. "Instead the spectators are the choreographers and everyone has the opportunity to decide how the piece develops."

We end our two days in The Hague at the dance finale on the Sunday evening, where approximately 1,000 dancers move in harmony to Ravel's *Bolero*, the music made famous by Torvill and Dean's Olympic-winning ice-skating performance in 1984.

Potter around Delft

On Monday morning we travel to the nearby city of Delft, which feels like a mini Amsterdam with its romantic canals, market squares and more cyclists.

At the heart of the city are two spectacular churches. The first, which is nicknamed 'Old Jan', has a leaning tower like the one in Pisa, Italy, and was once considered so unsteady that locals didn't want to live near it – although it has now stood since the 11th century. The main square is home to what is called 'the New Church', even though it was built in the 13th century. It belongs to the faith of Calvinism, the second-largest religion in the Netherlands, after Catholicism. Apart from its history, Holland has been known for its social tolerance, and was once a haven for Jews (although many Dutch Jews were killed in the Holocaust) and today Islam is the fastest-growing religion in the country.

However, what puts Delft on the map is its world-famous pottery, decorated with the classic Delft Blue patterns. It is all handcrafted and you can see how it is made at the Royal Delft factory.

If you want to discover Delft and The Hague and save money at the same time, buy the City Card, which offers discounts on trams, buses and admission prices to top attractions. In Amsterdam, invest in the 'I Amsterdam Card', which gives you discounted entry into Hermitage Amsterdam, as well as old favourites like Anne Frank's House and the Rijksmuseum.

Between all three cities, you're sure to leave Holland on a cultural high.

ABOVE: DESIGNER SHOPS AT THE PASSAGE, IN THE HAGUE
BELOW: VERMEER'S *GIRL WITH A PEARL EARRING* ON A DELFT BLUE PLATE

"Vermeer's painting, *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, attracts visitors from all over the world"

FLY Flybe has regular flights to Amsterdam from Exeter, Norwich and Southampton

FACT FILE

City Card: www.citycardthehaguedelft.com
Dutch tourist board: www.holland.com/uk
Hermitage Amsterdam: www.hermitage.nl
'I Amsterdam Card': www.iamsterdamcard.com
Mauritshuis: www.mauritshuis.nl
Royal Delft factory: www.royaldelft.com

Where to stay

Carlton Ambassador

Where: Sophialaan 2, The Hague
What: This fantastic four-star hotel is just ten minutes' walk from the Peace Palace, in a beautiful part of The Hague. Rooms start from €119 (£85).
Contact: 0031 (0)70 363 0363; www.carlton.nl/ambassador

NH Hotel

Where: Prinses Margrietplantsoen 100, The Hague
What: A delightful modern designer hotel near the business centre of The Hague. Prices start from €75 (£54).
Contact: 0031 (0)70 381 2345; www.nh-hotels.com

Hotel Mercure

Where: Spui 180, The Hague
What: Towering above the city, this splendid luxury hotel is located in the heart of The Hague and has a gym, restaurant, bar and balconies. Prices start from €94 (£67).
Contact: 0031 (0)70 363 6700; www.accorhotels.com

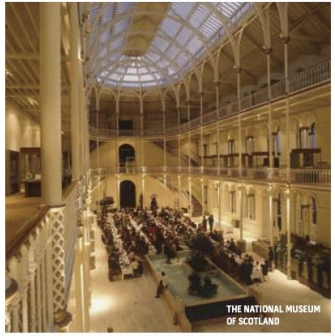
TRAVEL

48 Hours in Edinburgh

SOMETIMES CALLED THE 'ATHENS OF THE NORTH', EDINBURGH IS FULL OF HISTORY, BUT IT'S ALSO LOOKING FORWARD TO A BRIGHT FUTURE. HERE'S A WEEKEND GUIDE TO THIS EXCITING CITY

WORDS DAN SAVERY PICTURES GETTY

These are extraordinary times for Edinburgh. Back in the not-so-distant mid 1990s, the city was depicted as a gloomy urban sprawl, home to the disenchanted youth in the now classic 1996 film *Trainspotting*. But so much has changed since then. For a start, the Scottish capital now has its own Parliament, a booming property market, and plenty of activities to keep visitors amused for weeks on end. If you've only got a weekend, here's our guide to making the most of 48 hours in the Scottish capital.



THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF SCOTLAND

FRIDAY

2pm

What better way to get to know the city than by uncovering a bit of history on Chambers Street? This is home to the National Museum of Scotland, which recently started work on a £46m transformation. There are more than 16 fascinating galleries to explore here, housing everything from ancient Egyptian treasures to a NASA space suit.

4pm

Our Dynamic Earth is one of Scotland's most exhilarating visitor attractions. Located on Holyrood Road, it's a kind of hybrid of the Eden Project and the Natural History Museum, and is the only UK science centre dedicated to the story of planet earth. As climate change is high on the agenda, Our Dynamic Earth is a timely exhibition that takes you back 15,000 million years via erupting volcanoes, dinosaurs and polar extremes.

6pm

As the sun goes down, head to Holyrood Park and take a brisk walk up Arthur's Seat. Rising above the city to a height of 251 metres, Arthur's Seat is the main peak in the park, whose extraordinary natural landscape was formed by an extinct volcano system. The gentle climb is very popular and the summit provides stunning panoramic views across the city. If the weather's good, you'll be able to see the Ochil Hills beyond the Forth Road Bridge.

9pm

If all that time-travelling and hill-walking has made you hungry, then take an evening stroll to the Grassmarket area of the Old Town, where there's a wealth of great restaurants to sample. Here you can choose between a French bistro called Petit Paris, fine international dining at Howies or Indian cuisine at Khushis. Established in 1947, Khushis is an institution, with fabulous exotic décor and skilful chefs that flame-grill your tandoori chicken to order. No, it's not traditional haggis, tatties and neeps, but this is all about getting a taste of the modern, multicultural Edinburgh.

"On a clear day it is possible to see ships sailing on the Firth of Forth from the castle"

SATURDAY

9am

Begin the day with an early-morning visit to Edinburgh Castle. This is where the city began. It is thought that the site of Castle Rock was inhabited and probably fortified in prehistoric times. On a clear day, it is possible to see ships sailing on the Firth of Forth from here.

11am

At the top of the Royal Mile, visit the Scotch Whisky Experience. This attraction offers a unique insight into Scotch Whisky past and present. Amazingly, it's a family attraction and even has a Scotch Whisky barrel ride for kids – although parents may enjoy the visit more...

1pm

Need a drink and a bite to eat? Then do have tea at the Spoon Café on Blackfriars Street. With a range of fresh tasty salads and paninis, the staff serve everything but the greasy food the cafe's name suggests!

2pm

In the afternoon, take a trip to the new Scottish Parliament building, which was formally opened by the Queen in October 2004. Designed by Catalan architect Enric Miralles, the building cost more than £414m and was three years late. However, as the Act of Union merged the Kingdom of Scotland with the Kingdom of England in 1707, you could say that the Scots actually waited nearly 300 years for this building. After years of political struggle, Scotland was finally granted its own Parliament when devolution was introduced in 1999.

>

Where to stay

Ten Hill Place

Where: 10 Hill Place, Edinburgh
What: Owned by the Royal College of Surgeons, Ten Hill Place has now been transformed into a stylish 78-bedroom contemporary hotel. Rooms start from £87.
Contact: 0131 662 2080; www.tenhillplacehotel.com

Toftcombs House

Where: Peebles Road, near Biggar
What: A truly delightful country house for hire, only 26 miles from Edinburgh. Price starts from £1,650 for a three-night short break on a self-catering basis.
Contact: 01738 451 610; www.cottages-and-castles.co.uk

Balmoral Hotel

Where: 1 Princes Street
What: The Balmoral is one of the Leading Hotels of the World and offers 188 opulent suites and stylish rooms with views towards Edinburgh Castle and the Old Town. Rooms start from £305.
Contact: 0131 556 2414; www.thebalmoralhotel.com

FACT FILE

Airlink (shuttle bus from Edinburgh airport): www.flybybus.com
Edinburgh Festival Fringe: www.edfringe.com
Edinburgh International Festival: www.eif.co.uk
Highland tours: www.rabbies.com
Historic Scotland: www.historic-scotland.gov.uk
Khushis: www.khushis.com
National Museum of Scotland: www.nms.ac.uk
Our Dynamic Earth: www.dynamicearth.co.uk
Scotch Whisky Experience: www.scotchwhiskyexperience.co.uk
Scotland's National Tourism Organisation: www.visitscotland.com
Scottish Parliament: www.scottish.parliament.uk
The Edinburgh Dungeon: www.thedungeons.com
Ten Hill Place hotel: www.tenhillplace.com

3.30pm

Crossing the Waverley Bridge, you will find The Edinburgh Dungeon. The entry sign reads 'Abandon hope all ye who enter here' because this is a journey into Edinburgh's darkest depths. Here you can find out about the city's gruesome past including torture chambers, diseases, and clan wars, and you can even wander into a haunted labyrinth. Spooky stuff.

5pm

As the sun goes down, shop for souvenirs immediately down from the castle on the Royal Mile, a long cobbled street lined with tourist attractions, cafés and Scottish-themed shops. If you want to buy Celtic music, shortbread or tartan cloth, this is the place to get it. Tartan is synonymous with Scottish ancestry, and if you've got Scottish blood in your veins you might be able to find your family's pattern here.

7pm

You will have no doubt worked up quite an appetite by now, so head to The Witchery, a lavish restaurant set in a historic 16th-century building next to the Castle. Ewan McGregor, Michael Douglas and Jack Nicholson have all dined here. Yes, it's a little expensive. But if you really want to treat yourself, then this has to be the most atmospheric and spectacular dining destination in town.

9pm

In the evening, relax by watching a show at The Stand, one of Edinburgh's top comedy venues. All year round this club showcases the best local talent around. Prepare to laugh yourself silly.

> "The Scott Monument is a soaring Gothic sign of Scottish pride – beneath you're sure to find a lone bagpiper playing *Amazing Grace*"

SUNDAY

9am

It's your last day in Edinburgh, so do some shopping on Princes Street. This is no ordinary high street. Each year, it is home to the Hogmanay party on New Year's Eve, and all of its shops are restricted to one side of the road so as not to obstruct the view of Edinburgh Castle. Placed on Princes Street Gardens, the Scott Monument is a soaring Gothic sign of Scottish pride – it has 287 steps to the top. Beneath the monument you can be sure to find a lone bagpiper playing *Amazing Grace* while clad in a kilt – whatever the weather!

11.30am

Explore the New Town – a UNESCO World Heritage Site and the most prestigious neighbourhood in Edinburgh. Despite its name, it was actually built between 1765 and 1850, and retains much of the original neo-classical architecture. Nearby, you can take a stroll beside the picturesque Water of Leith – a river that runs from the Pentland Hills into the heart of Edinburgh.

12.30pm

There's just about time to grab a bite to eat, so if you get peckish in this part of town, then try out the newly-opened Gusto on George Street, which serves excellent Italian food at reasonable prices.

2pm

Unfortunately your 48 hours in Edinburgh has come to a close, but there's so much more to see and do. As you make your way back home with your suitcase full of souvenirs, imagine what you could do on your next visit...

FLY **Flybe has flights to Edinburgh from Belfast, Bergerac, Birmingham, Cardiff, Exeter, Jersey, Manchester, Newquay, Norwich, Rennes and Southampton**

On your next visit...

- Take a stroll along the beaches of Portobello, just 20 minutes from the city centre.
- Visit the National Museum of Flight at East Fortune Airfield, which showcases a potted history of aviation from the Spitfire to Concorde. It is also home to Scotland's only airshow, which takes place on July 26th 2008.
- Edinburgh is a great base for exploring the rest of Scotland. Many Highland tours begin at Edinburgh Castle, and, if you have enough time, you could book yourself on a range of one-day trips including visits to Loch Ness, Glencoe, Stirling Castle and the 'bonnie banks' of Loch Lomond.

Brest

Let there be light

Brest overlooks one of the most beautiful bays in France. The whole of the northernmost stretch of the Breton coast is rich with rocky bays and atmospheric lighthouses – among the finest is this one, located on the Raz headland on the Finistère coastline, just north of Brest.

Nearby, the Créac'h Lighthouse, on the small island of L'Ile d'Ouessant, at the extreme western tip of the Brittany coast, has one of the most powerful lights in the world and, along with Wolf Rock lighthouse at Land's End, marks the entrance to the English Channel from the Atlantic.

Lighthouses use a system of lamps and lenses to mark dangerous coastlines, submerged sandbanks and safe entries to harbours and can also assist in aerial navigation. However, because of modern electronic navigational aids, the number of operational lighthouses has declined to fewer than 1,500 worldwide.

Since Roman times, Brest has been the site of a fortress due to its large natural harbour and its relative inaccessibility by land, which made it easy to defend. For centuries it was the country's main naval port and although Brest suffered heavily from Allied bombing during the Second World War, the town retains a great deal of its charm. Visitors can marvel at the St Louis building with its remarkable stained-glass windows, the Fine Art Museum and the Oceanopolis, a spectacular multi-level aquarium.

FLY

FLYBE HAS REGULAR FLIGHTS TO BREST FROM BIRMINGHAM, EXETER, MANCHESTER AND SOUTHAMPTON

www.flybe.com

Inverness

Monstrous beauty

It's big, wild and beautiful. Loch Ness is more than 32 km (20 miles) long, a mile wide and 700 feet at its deepest, making it the largest body of water in Scotland by volume. The world-famous Loch is at the heart of the Highlands, just 11 km (7 miles) east of Inverness, Scotland's fastest-growing city.

One of the most intriguing aspects of Loch Ness is the phenomenon of the Loch Ness Monster or 'Nessie', an enormous creature that some believe lives in the Loch. The first recorded sighting of Nessie was in AD 565, when it was said to have snatched up and eaten a local farmer. There were numerous sightings in the 1930s during the construction of the A82 and several photographs that appear to show a slender head and neck rising above the water. While there is no conclusive evidence to prove the monster is real, it's always worth a trip to Loch Ness to see for yourself.

The surrounding countryside isn't just scenic, it's teeming with wildlife and a host of visitor attractions all set against a breathtaking backdrop. You could spend a relaxing day fishing for salmon, try your hand at sailing, windsurf or canoe on the Loch, go mountain biking, hillwalking or paragliding and even ski on the Nevis mountain range.

FLY

FLYBE HAS REGULAR FLIGHTS TO INVERNESS FROM BELFAST, BIRMINGHAM, EXETER, GUERNSEY, JERSEY, LONDON GATWICK, MANCHESTER AND SOUTHAMPTON

REEL Scenes

Our guide to some spectacular film locations lets you put yourself in the picture

WORDS DAN SAVERY PICTURES GETTY IMAGES, REX, SXC

Europe's atmospheric landscapes and iconic buildings have always had star quality, but although cinema was born in France in 1895, during the 20th century Europe's attractions were mostly overlooked by film-makers searching for locations. Instead Hollywood took over the movies, filming on their home turf. But now more and more directors have realised what they've been missing, and are shooting films on this side of the Atlantic. From James Bond to Harry Potter, directors are using Europe's treasures as the backdrop for their creations. Here is a selection of places where you can relive the action...

The Sound of Music (1965)

Location: Salzburg, Austria
Stars: Julie Andrews and Christopher Plummer.
Setting the scene: In perhaps one of the most celebrated scenes in cinema, Maria von Trapp (Julie Andrews) sings the title song with the glorious Austrian Alps as the backdrop. Today, fans from all over the world visit Salzburg to experience the sights and sounds of their favourite movie.
Other films shot here: *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* and *The Third Man*.
Useful website: www.official-soundofmusic-tour.com

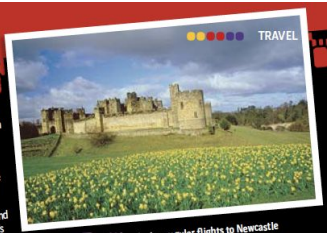
FLY Flybe operates direct flights to Salzburg from Exeter and Southampton (from December 15th 2007)

A Good Year (2006)

Location: Provence, France
Stars: Russell Crowe and Albert Finney.
Setting the scene: Provence stands out in this film where Max Skinner (Crowe) inherits a vineyard from his deceased uncle (Finney) and learns to take life less seriously. Director Ridley Scott (*Alien* and *Blade Runner*), lives in Provence and thought of the film title over some wine...
Other films shot here: *Ronin*, *Moonraker* and *Jules et Jim*.
Useful website: www.avignon-et-provence.com

FLY Flybe has regular flights to Avignon from Exeter and Southampton

Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone (2001)



Location: Alnwick Castle, Northumberland
Stars: Daniel Radcliffe, Rupert Grint, Emma Watson, Alan Rickman, Maggie Smith, Robbie Coltrane, Richard Harris.
Setting the scene: Harry Potter fans should head 33 miles north of Newcastle to Alnwick Castle, the main location for Hogwarts School, where Harry Potter meets his friends Hermione Granger and Ron Weasley. Gloucester and Durham's cathedrals were also used for interiors.
Other films shot here: *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* and *Ivanhoe*.
Useful website: www.alnwickcastle.com

FLY Flybe has regular flights to Newcastle from Belfast, Brussels, Exeter, Guernsey, Jersey, Limoges and Southampton

Casino Royale (2006)

Location: Lake Como, Italy
Stars: Daniel Craig, Eva Green and a cameo from Richard Branson.
Setting the scene: Relive this Bond film at Villa La Gaeta, a beautiful private residence near Menaggio, which was used for the scene where Bond shoots terrorist Mr White before saying the immortal line, "The name's Bond, James Bond."
Other films shot here: This famous lake has been the backdrop for a host of movies, including the romantic scenes in *Star Wars Episode II: Attack of the Clones*. It is also the real-life home of George Clooney.
Useful websites: www.discovercomo.com, www.jamesbondlifestyle.com

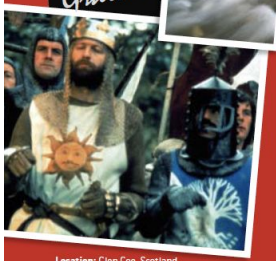
FLY Flybe has regular flights to Milan Malpensa from Birmingham and Manchester

Keeping Mum (2005)

Location: Isle of Man
Stars: Rowan Atkinson, Maggie Smith, Kristin Scott Thomas and Patrick Swayze.
Setting the scene: Various locations on the Isle of Man – including Braddan, Douglas, Foxdale and St John's – were used as the fictional sleepy hamlet of Little Wallop, where a disillusioned Gloria (Scott Thomas) fails to resist the advances of her handsome, American golf instructor Lance (Swayze).
Other films shot here: The Isle of Man has become one of the busiest areas of film production in the British Isles, having played host to more than 80 feature films and TV dramas since 1995, including *Five Children and It*, *Miss Potter* and *Iron Man*.
Useful website: www.isleofmanfilm.com >

FLY Flybe has regular flights to the Isle of Man from Birmingham, Geneva, London Gatwick, London Luton, Manchester and Southampton

Monty Python and the Holy Grail (1975)



Location: Glen Coe, Scotland
Stars: John Cleese, Michael Palin, Terry Jones, Eric Idle, Graham Chapman and Terry Gilliam.
Setting the scene: Shot almost entirely in Scotland, this classic comedy sees the Knights of the Round Table being given tasks by a very silly John Cleese. The film was the basis for the hit West End musical, *Spamalot*.
Other films shot here: *Rob Roy* and *Highlander*.
Useful website: www.scotlandthemovie.com

FLY Flybe has regular flights to Glasgow from Belfast, Birmingham, Exeter, Frankfurt, Guernsey, Manchester, Norwich and Southampton

The Da Vinci Code (2006)

Location: Paris, France
Stars: Tom Hanks, Sir Ian McKellen, Jean Reno
Setting the scene: The Louvre granted permission for director Ron Howard to film on its premises for this thriller, but as the crew was not allowed to shine a light on the *Mona Lisa*, a replica was used instead. There are all manner of Da Vinci Code tours available where you can retrace the footsteps of lead character Robert Langdon, but the best way to explore Paris is independently.
Other films shot here: Over 650 film shoots take place in Paris each year. Recent films include *The Devil Wears Prada* and *Before Sunset*.
Useful website: www.allparistours.com

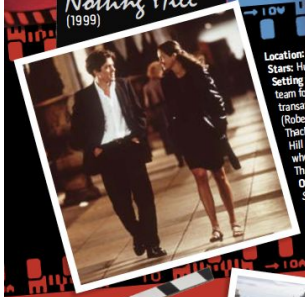
FLY Flybe has regular flights to Paris from Belfast, Birmingham, Cardiff, Edinburgh, Exeter, Manchester, Norwich and Southampton

A Matter of Life and Death (1946)

Location: Saunton Sands, Devon
Stars: David Niven, Kim Hunter and a very young Richard Attenborough.
Setting the scene: Squadron Leader Peter Carter (Niven) miraculously awakes on a beach after crashing his Lancaster Bomber the night before and believes he is in heaven – an easy mistake to make, given he is on Saunton Sands in Devon. Directed by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, *A Matter of Life and Death* is considered one of the greatest British films of all time.
Other films shot here: In 1982 Pink Floyd's film *The Wall* used the beach for the first World War trench scenes and it was also the setting of Robbie Williams' *Angels* video.
Useful website: www.devon-holiday.com

FLY Flybe has regular flights to Exeter from Aberdeen, Alicante, Amsterdam, Belfast, Bergerac, Brest, Chambery (from December 15th), Dublin, Edinburgh, Faro, Geneva, Glasgow, Guernsey, Jersey, Leeds, Malaga, Manchester, Newcastle, Nice, Norwich, Palma, Paris, Rennes and Salzburg (from December 15th)

Notting Hill (1999)



Location: London, England
Stars: Hugh Grant and Julia Roberts
Setting the scene: The Four Weddings and a Funeral team followed up their smash hit with another transatlantic romance, with movie star Anna Scott (Roberts) falling for mild-mannered bookseller William Thacker (Grant). Writer Richard Curtis chose Notting Hill because he felt its diverse mix made it a place where two people from different worlds could meet. The area's famous Portobello Road was a key location.
Other films shot here: *Bridget Jones's Diary*, *Shakespeare in Love* and David Cronenberg's recent Russian crime thriller, *Eastern Promises*.
Useful website: www.filmlondon.org.uk

FLY Flybe has regular flights to London Gatwick from Belfast, Bergerac, Guernsey, Inverness, Isle of Man and Jersey. Flights from Luton to the Isle of Man start February 2nd (Saturdays only)

Trainspotting (1996)

Location: Edinburgh, Scotland
Stars: Ewan McGregor, Jonny Lee Miller and Robert Carlyle.
Setting the scene: "Choose life. Choose a job..." are the famous opening words of Danny Boyle's classic British film that made Hollywood sit up and listen. The beginning of the film shows a glimpse of Edinburgh as Renton (McGregor) is seen running away down Princes Street towards the Calton Street Bridge. Although the film didn't show Edinburgh in its best light, the Scots are rightly proud of it, and today you can go on the *Trainspotting* Tour and see where some of the film's epic moments were shot.
Other films shot here: *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, *Shallow Grave*
Useful website: www.leithwalks.co.uk

FLY Flybe has regular flights to Edinburgh from Belfast, Birmingham, Exeter, Jersey, Manchester, Newquay, Norwich, Paris and Southampton

Saving Private Ryan (1998)

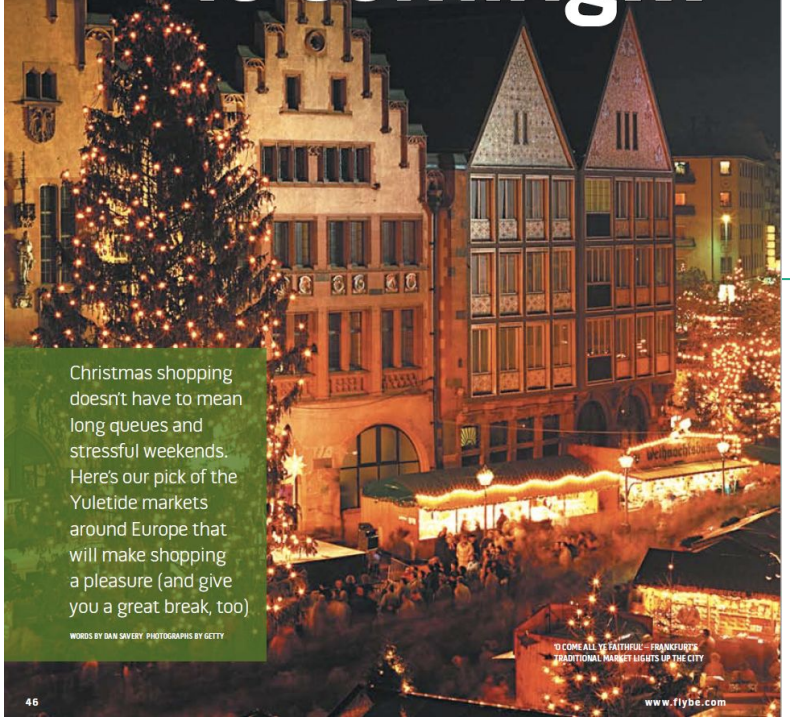
Location: Curracloe Beach, Ireland
Stars: Tom Hanks, Matt Damon and Vin Diesel
Setting the scene: Following *Schindler's List*, Steven Spielberg's next Second World War film focused on the D-Day landings. The gruelling 24-minute opening beach battle, depicting the Omaha Beach landings, was actually shot in Curracloe in Wexford, Ireland. Other scenes were filmed in locations in London, Oxfordshire, Wiltshire, parts of Normandy and even a former British Aerospace factory in Hatfield, Hertfordshire. "I think that the Second World War is the most significant event of the last 100 years," said Spielberg. "The fate of the baby boomers and even Generation X was linked to the outcome."
Other films shot here: *The Commitments*, *Excalibur* and *In the Name of the Father*.
Useful website: www.filmnet.ie

FLY Flybe has regular flights to Dublin from Exeter, Norwich and Southampton

Christmas is coming...

Christmas shopping doesn't have to mean long queues and stressful weekends. Here's our pick of the Yuletide markets around Europe that will make shopping a pleasure (and give you a great break, too)

WORDS BY DAN SAVERY PHOTOGRAPHS BY GETTY



'O COME ALL YE FAITHFUL' – FRANKFURT'S TRADITIONAL MARKET LIGHTS UP THE CITY

PARIS, France

When to go: December 4th-December 31st

Location: Various sites around the city, including La Defense and Les Halles.

What can I expect? France is famed for its fabulous street markets all year round, but there is something particularly special about Paris at Christmas with shops, hotels and parks decorated with lights and ribbons. Paris features several Christmas markets, but the two most impressive and traditional are those at La Defense and Les Halles.

La Defense is in the west of the city and features an ice rink, while Les Halles is in the city centre and offers wonderfully-decorated streets and stalls packed with beautiful hand-crafted Christmas decorations, unusual gifts and foods. If you want to send something different to your friends this year why not buy some stylish French Christmas cards? There are also free concerts held within churches in the weeks preceding Christmas.

Useful website: en.parisinfo.com

FLY Flybe has regular flights to Paris from Belfast, Birmingham, Cardiff, Edinburgh, Exeter, Manchester, Norwich and Southampton.

THE SPECTACULAR CHAMPS-ELYSEES, PLANTED WITH OVER 250 CHRISTMAS TREES EACH YEAR

WHAT BETTER WAY TO UNWIND AFTER A DAY'S SHOPPING THAN WITH A CUP OF WARM MULLED WINE?

BELFAST, Northern Ireland

When to go: November 21st-December 18th

Location: The front lawns of City Hall

What can I expect? Belfast's Christmas Market has a real continental feel. The front lawns of City Hall are divided into a number of villages including Irish, German and European. Each village has its own themed entertainment as well as gifts, crafts and food.

The delicious food stalls range from Paella from Cordoba in Spain to Madame Petit's cheeses from Normandy, the Rocket and Relish Gourmet Burger Bar and Lavery's Irish Bar, serving traditional beers and stouts.

All of the market stalls are covered in twinkling lights and there are also exotic gifts from Asia and Africa to add some spice to the festive season.

And as if that's not enough, choral groups, school choirs and brass bands from across Northern Ireland are there to entertain shoppers with Christmas songs and carols.

Useful website: www.belfastcity.gov.uk

FLY Flybe has regular flights to Belfast from Aberdeen, Birmingham, Cardiff, Doncaster, Edinburgh, Exeter, Galway, Glasgow, Inverness, Jersey, Leeds, London Gatwick, Manchester, Newcastle, Newquay, Paris, Rennes and Southampton.

FRANKFURT, Germany

When to go: November 26th-December 21st

Location: Römerberg, Paulsplatz and Mainkai

What can I expect? In terms of sheer visitor numbers and size, Frankfurt's Christmas Market is one of the most important in Germany. The elaborate and creative stand decorations, the scenic surroundings of the Römerberg and Paulsplatz and the huge Christmas tree also make it one of its most beautiful.

Set in the centre of the old city, this market's history reaches back to the 14th century. Because only local tradesmen were allowed to offer their wares at the market, Frankfurt's fair developed its own specialties — which can still be found today. Among them are the Brenten (almond cookie), Bethmännchen (a kind of marzipan ball cookie), and Quetschenmännchen (prune figures). There are elaborate advent concerts on the main stage throughout the month and St Nicholas visits the city on December 6th. The Frankfurt market is so loved that it has been imitated all over Europe, but for many, the original is still the best.

Useful website: www.frankfurt-tourismus.de

FLY Flybe flies to Frankfurt from Birmingham, Glasgow, Manchester and Southampton.

EACH YEAR NEARLY THREE MILLION PEOPLE MAKE THEIR WAY TO FRANKFURT'S MARKET

DÜSSELDORF, Germany

When to go: November 22nd–December 23rd.
Location: Various parts of Düsseldorf.
What can I expect? In Marktplatz, the Town Hall creates a magical backdrop for chalets selling all kinds of goodies, while a 100-year-old merry-go-round adds to the festive feel. The adjoining Marktstrasse is turned into an arts and crafts quarter where art metal workers and wood carvers sell their wares, while the Heinrich-Heine-Platz has market huts adorned with floral wrought-iron motifs and angel figures. In a courtyard behind Wilhelm-Mark-Hus you'll find the Stadtbrückehen market with trendy products from all over the world and music from students and choirs. Families will enjoy Schadowplatz, with fun rides and entertainment for the children, while stylish Schadowstrasse has chalets vying with illuminated Santas and red-nosed reindeer.
Useful website: www.duesseldorf-tourismus.de

SOAK UP THE FESTIVE MOOD AT DÜSSELDORF'S MARKTPLATZ

FLY Flybe has regular flights to Düseldorf from Birmingham, Manchester and Southampton.

BRUSSELS, Belgium

When to go: December 1st-January 6th. The market is open Monday-Thursday from 12pm-9pm; Friday-Sunday 11am-10pm.
Location: This year's market extends across the Bourse (stock exchange), Marché aux Poissons (fish market) and Place Sainte Catherine.
What can I expect? As you would expect from a city that is home to the EU Parliament, Brussels' Christmas market has a distinctly international theme, with various stalls representing different European countries.

Brussels hosts the largest Christmas market in Belgium. There are over 200 stalls selling traditional arts and crafts, jewellery, hand-made Christmas tree decorations and, of course, Belgian chocolate! Other specialities include steamed snails and hard, flat cookies known as 'speculoos'. For those who tire of shopping, an ice-rink is also set up at the fish market, plus there is a large Ferris wheel.
Useful website: www.visitbelgium.com

EUROPEAN FLAIR AT THE PLACE SAINTE CATHERINE IN BRUSSELS

FLY Flybe has regular flights to Brussels (twice daily) from Manchester and Southampton.

SALZBURG, Austria

When to go: November 22nd–December 24th
Location: The foot of the Hohensalzburg fortress and around the Cathedral of Salzburg and Residence Squares.
What can I expect? Salzburg's traditional Christmas market (Christkindlmarkt) is one of the oldest and dates back as far as the 15th century. Salzburg was the home of Mozart and today the market is filled with superb street musicians and live performers playing seasonal tunes.

The stalls sell an eclectic selection of gifts, including candles, gingerbread, wooden toys, lanterns and elegant Christmas ornaments. The market is also known for its beautiful floral arrangements, textiles and hand-made educational toys.

And if you want a break from shopping, you could relax by watching one of the Advent plays performed on the steps of the cathedral.
Useful website: www.christkindlmarkt.co.at

CHRISTMAS AND MOZART – SALZBURG'S MARKET HAS A MUSICAL ATMOSPHERE

FLY Flybe operates flights to Salzburg from Exeter (from 15th December, Saturdays) and Southampton (from 15th December, Saturdays).

WINCHESTER, Hampshire

When to go: November 30th-December 16th. The market is open from 10am – 8.30pm every day (except the last day when it will finish at 6pm). The ice rink runs until January 6th, 2008.
Location: Situated at the foot of Winchester Cathedral in the historic grounds of the Inner Close, just 15 minutes from Southampton Airport.
What can I expect? It might not be the first place that springs to mind when you think of Christmas, but Winchester in Hampshire is certainly becoming a popular festive city. The Christmas Market is made up of 80 timber chalet-style stalls, all attractively arranged around a large outdoor ice rink.

The chalets are illuminated with tiny white lights and beautifully decorated, similar to those in the traditional German markets. The exhibitors in the chalets sell a wide range of unique and interesting gifts catering for all tastes and budgets.

The market, which saw more than 120,000 visitors last year, has doubled in size and this year includes many more chalets serving food and drink from home and abroad. Special Christmas and Twilight Tower Tours are available throughout the month of December and offer wonderful views across the city.
Useful website: www.winchesterchristmasmarket.co.uk

DANCING ON ICE – CHOIR BOYS TRY OUT THE CITY'S SKATING RINK

FLY Flybe has regular flights to Southampton from Alicante, Amsterdam, Angers, Avignon, Belfast, Bergerac, Berne (from 15th December), Bordeaux, Brest, Brussels (two daily), Chambéry (from 15th December, four weekly), Dublin, Dusseldorf, Edinburgh, Faro, Frankfurt, Galway, Geneva (starts 15th December, three weekly), Glasgow, Guernsey, Hannover, Isle of Man, Jersey, La Rochelle, Leeds, Limoges, Liverpool, Malaga, Manchester, Murcia, Newcastle, Nice, Palma, Paris, Perpignan, Rennes and Salzburg (from 15th December, Saturdays only).

TOULOUSE, France

When to go: December 4th-December 30th
Location: Set in the Place du Capitole in Toulouse's old town
What can I expect? Lacking a bit of Christmas cheer? Then head to the south-west of France, where delightful Toulouse's seasonal market is sure to get you in the festive mood.

The elegant Place du Capitole, in the centre of the city, is filled with lights and decorations, and includes over 130 wooden chalets. Each offers plenty of gift inspiration, from local traditional woodcrafts to unusual regional specialities. There are also toys, pottery, jewellery, candles, clothing and leather goods.

Peckish? Then check out the separate Christmas Food Market (from November 30th-December 9th) on Place Wilson where white pagodas sell a profusion of delicacies and drinks.
Useful website: www.uk.toulouse-tourisme.com

THE HUSTLE AND BUSTLE OF TOULOUSE'S WINTER MARKET

FLY Flybe flies to Toulouse from Birmingham.

WHERE TO STAY

CHARMING MANOR HOUSE

Where: Winchester, Hampshire
What: If you want a real treat, stay at the delightful Lainston House, which dates from the 17th century. Its beautiful countryside views are perfect with a sprinkling of snow!
Contact: Exclusive Hotels: www.exclusivehotels.co.uk

LUXURY LIVING

Where: Paris, France
What: The Hotel Le Marquis offers 36 intimate personalised rooms from €130 (£88) per night on the Rue Dupleix, near the Eiffel Tower, and the Champ de Mars. This gorgeous hotel is perfect for a Christmas treat.
Contact: Paris Selection: www.paris-selection.com

AUSTRIAN CLASSIC

Where: Salzburg, Austria
What: Laschenskyhof is a traditional family-run hotel with an excellent restaurant on the outskirts of Salzburg. Rooms start at €59 (£40).
Contact: www.laschensky.at

MUSIC TO YOUR EARS

Get ready for a summer of festival fever! Our pick of the best festivals around the UK and Europe has something for every musical taste

WORDS BY DAN MAYERS AND DAN SAVERY PICTURES BY GETTY, REX

PARTY ALL NIGHT

Benicàssim, Spain
17th-20th July

Now in its 14th year, the Benicàssim festival on Spain's beautiful Costa del Azahar takes the concept of the siesta to the extreme. Nothing much happens until early evening, and then the partying begins in earnest... Headline acts, which last year included the Arctic Monkeys, Muse and Devo, don't hit the stage until 2am and the party continues till dawn. Sleeping under canvas in the heat of the Mediterranean sun can be an ordeal, however, so consider hiring a villa for the weekend.

Tickets: www.fiberfib.com

EXPLORE

- Cool off in the Aquarama water park, next door to the festival site.
- Head up the coast to Peñiscola and explore its Moorish sea fort, which juts out into the Mediterranean on a narrow peninsula.
- Pop into the Campo de Mestalla, home of the successful Valencia football club.
- Valencia has Roman, Gothic and modernist architecture aplenty – architect Calatrava's City of Arts and Sciences is a marvel.
- If the sunshine ignites an urge to study, local university, Jaume I, runs three-day courses at the festival in subjects like Comics and Animation.

FLY Flybe has regular flights to Alicante from Exeter and Southampton. From Alicante, take the train direct to Benicàssim

FLY Flybe has regular flights to Southampton from Alicante, Amsterdam, Angers, Avignon, Belfast, Bergerac, Berne, Bordeaux, Brest, Brussels, Chambéry, Dublin, Düsseldorf, Edinburgh, Faro, Frankfurt, Galway, Geneva, Glasgow, Guernsey, Hannover, Isle of Man, Jersey, La Rochelle, Leeds, Limoges, Liverpool, Malaga, Manchester, Murcia, Newcastle, Nice, Palma, Paris, Perpignan, Rennes and Salzburg

FAMILY TREE

Larmer Tree Festival, Wiltshire 16th-20th July

If you fancy listening to some live music while basking in the natural beauty of a traditional English garden, then the family-friendly Larmer Tree Festival could be just the ticket. Celebrating its 18th birthday, this year's festival will be a non-stop five-day party. Located in Larmer Tree Gardens, just off the A354 between Salisbury and Blandford, the line-up ranges from Jools Holland and his Rhythm & Blues Orchestra to the kings of crustiness, The Levellers. Expect global grooves galore – past acts have included Los de Abajo, Baka Beyond and Balkan Beat Box. There's also a Secret Garden, carnival and lots of workshops for kids.

Tickets: www.larmertreefestival.co.uk

EXPLORE

- Visit Salisbury Cathedral, a magnificent 13th-century building with Britain's tallest spire and Europe's oldest working clock.
- Marvel at Stonehenge – a World Heritage Site and one of Britain's most important prehistoric monuments.
- Spend a day at Stourhead House and Garden, a magical 18th-century landscaped paradise dotted with classical temples.
- Picnic in the Cotswolds Water Park – 40 square miles of countryside with 140 lakes and lots of activities for kids. Find out more at www.waterpark.org

VIENNESE WHIRL

Salzburg, Austria
26th July-31st August

As Salzburg's festival is held in the city's finest theatres, it's unlikely that mud-caked wellington boots are part of the dress code. For five weeks the city of Mozart's birth is taken over by classical and opera enthusiasts keen to catch recitals by some of the world's leading musicians. Highlights for the 2008 summer season include Stephen Langridge's new production of Verdi's *Otello*, and Daniel Barenboim performing a selection of pieces with the Vienna Philharmonic. The inclusion of a wide-ranging theatre programme makes a trip to this beautiful city a must for culture vultures. Just don't forget the tux and tiara.

Tickets: www.salzburgfestival.at

EXPLORE

- A trip to Mozart's childhood home on Getreidegasse is a must for music lovers.
- Marvel at the delicate geology of the Eisriesenwelt, a 42-km system of ice tunnels and caverns near Werfen, which is the largest of its kind in the world.
- Carved out of solid rock by 800 men, the tunnel and lift up to the dizzy heights of Hitler's mountain retreat, the Eagle's Nest, are astonishing feats of engineering.
- Take the funicular up to the Hohensalzburg Fortress, the largest and most spectacular medieval castle in Europe.

FLY Flybe flies direct to Salzburg from Exeter and Southampton

FLY Flybe has regular flights to Edinburgh from Belfast, Bergerac, Birmingham, Cardiff, Exeter, Jersey, Manchester, Newquay, Norwich, Paris, Rennes and Southampton

HIGHLAND FLING

T in the Park, Scotland
11-13th July

Premiering in 1994, T in the Park may lack the heritage of Glastonbury, but it's already a convincing pretender to the throne. Scooping the best UK festival award in 2005 and 2006 helped attract a huge crowd in 2007 for feature acts The Killers, Razorlight and Snow Patrol, plus 'early bird' tickets for 2008 were snapped up in record time. Last year was the first time the festival stretched across three days, and while the sunshine can't always be guaranteed this far north, the friendly Scottish crowd certainly know how to party, whatever the weather.

Tickets: www.tinthepark.com

EXPLORE

- Take a boat across nearby Loch Leven to the island castle that held Mary Queen of Scots prisoner in 1567.
- The southern Highlands of Scotland are littered with ancient castles; try Castle Campbell, on the A91 near Dollar, or Elcho Castle near Perth.
- Head south towards Dunfermline and check out the sharks at Deep Sea World, nestling under the arches of the Forth Rail Bridge. In cages, obviously.

HOT AND HEAVY

Rock Werchter, Belgium 3rd-6th July

The three-times winner of the World's Best Festival award, Rock Werchter is a big event in the festival calendar. An emphasis on guitars means you can expect to see greasy hordes both on stage and off. Battle-scarred metal merchants Metallica headlined last year, but other genres are well represented, including Belgium's abiding love, dance music. Faithless and The Chemical Brothers both had the crowds jumping in 2007. With something for everyone, Rock Werchter is one of the few festivals to last four days – if you can bear not washing for that long...

Tickets: www.rockwerchter.be

EXPLORE

- Belgium is world-famous for its beers, and nearby Leuven is home to the Stella Artois and Domus breweries, both available for visits. And tastings...
- Soothe those ringing ears by enjoying the serene atmosphere of Leuven's churches, including Park Abbey, founded in 1129 by Geoffrey the Bearded.
- Leave a day free to explore Brussels and fill up on chips, chocolate and mussels – not necessarily in that order...
- Head over to Ghent. This beautiful city of waterways and cobbled streets has more listed buildings than the rest of Belgium put together.

GLOBAL SOUNDS

Amsterdam Roots Festival, Holland 14th-21st June

Amsterdam has been a cultural melting pot for centuries, which makes it a very appropriate place to hold a major world-music festival. The Roots event sprang from an African music festival held 25 years ago, but its reach has extended since then to cover everything from Brazilian samba to Spanish gypsy music. Artists appearing in previous years include world-music stars such as Fela Kuti, Youssou N'Dour and Gilberto Gil. Festival-goers can catch more than 60 concerts in the run-up to a free outdoor gig held in Oosterpark, attended by 50,000 people.

Tickets: www.amsterdamroots.nl

EXPLORE

- If it's your first trip to Amsterdam, familiarise yourself by taking a walking tour around the old town and red-light district.
- Once you've explored the streets, take a dinner cruise along the canals and see the city from another perspective.
- Amsterdam has a very different atmosphere from the Dutch countryside. Head for the windmills at Zaanse Schans, and drop in on one of the few cheese farms that still roll out Edam in the traditional way.
- Jump on a train and take the hour-long ride down to The Hague. Not just a bureaucratic hub, it's also full of art and culture.

SMOOTH TUNES

Montreaux Jazz Festival, Switzerland 4th-19th July

If the prospect of not showering for days doesn't appeal, but dressing up for Salzburg isn't your thing either, then Montreaux's jazz festival is the ideal alternative. For two weeks every summer, this glamorous town on the Lake Geneva shore hosts the biggest names in jazz – artists who have appeared at previous festivals include Miles Davis and Ella Fitzgerald. The festival also has an enviable reputation for eclectic programming, so expect everything from world-music stars to Motörhead. And with no camping available, you're secure in the knowledge your head will rest on feather pillows rather than stones at the end of every night. Very civilised.

Tickets: www.montreuxjazz.com

EXPLORE

- Take the funicular railway from Caux up to Rochers-de-Naye mountain, where you can wander through La Rambertia alpine garden, then climb to the 2,045m summit and take in stunning views across the Alps.
- Visit the 1,000-year-old Chillon Castle, setting of Byron's epic poem, *Prisoner of Chillon*.
- Geneva's not all clocks and chocolate; its boulevards drip with luxury goods.
- Head to Gstaad for mountain biking, walking or summer-skiing.
- Walk along the Lake Geneva promenade.

My kind of town

SOUTHAMPTON

INTERVIEW BY DAN SAVERY PICTURES BY GETTY

Charlie Dimmock, part of BBC's *Ground Force* team for eight years, talks about her life in Hampshire

How long have you lived in Hampshire?
I was born in Hampshire and basically grew up there – apart from two years in New Zealand and three years in Somerset during my time at Horticultural College. I still live in Hampshire, between Southampton and Salisbury, on the border of the New Forest. My home is cottagey in style and my garden is currently being revamped as I've slightly neglected it recently!

What is the best thing about Southampton?
The great thing about Southampton is that it's right on the coast but also right near the New Forest, as well as accessible for other parts of the UK like London or Birmingham. It's also easy for driving around and parking. Shopping is good in Southampton and it is also just across the water from the Isle of Wight.

How would you spend your perfect day?
I enjoy just tootling about not doing too much – pottering in the garden or spending time with friends over a barbeque or meal. I used to want to travel in my spare time but now that I travel a lot with my work I just want to stay at home!

What are the three most important items you pack in your luggage when travelling abroad?
Suntan cream, a bottle opener/corkscrew and a travel towel – one of those that dries quickly and can fit into your hand luggage.

Where are the most memorable gardens you have worked on?
Doing Nelson Mandela's garden was really cool.

However, I also enjoyed working in New York for the Bette Midler Foundation – I've been asked back to do the second part of the garden. And, when I worked for Air New Zealand as a check-in clerk in Auckland airport, I was also given the responsibility of looking after the gardens at the front of the airport!

Are there any gardens in Hampshire you recommend to visit?
We're spoilt for choice in Hampshire but I would say Hilliers Arboretum is a must-see for its fabulous trees and shrubs, and the Longstock Water Garden is also worth visiting – although it's only open once a month during the summer. Mottisfont Abbey has a beautiful collection of roses in walled gardens with the River Tess running through it and Exbury Gardens is wonderful for its rhododendron and camellias.

What projects are you working on?
I'm currently in the process of writing a book for non-gardeners, offering basic hints and tips. I'm also working on the gardens of a new property development in Portugal called The Savannahs (www.thesavannahs.info) with a company called Jadrim Vista and I travel out regularly to consult on the garden design.

FLY Flybe has regular flights to Southampton from Alicante, Amsterdam, Angers, Avignon, Belfast, Bergerac, Berne (from 15th December), Bordeaux, Brest, Brussels (two daily), Chambéry (from 15th December, four weekly), Dublin, Dusseldorf, Edinburgh, Faro, Frankfurt, Galway, Geneva (starts 15th December, three weekly), Glasgow, Guernsey, Hannover, Isle of Man, Jersey, La Rochelle, Leeds, Limoges, Liverpool, Malaga, Manchester, Murcia, Newcastle, Nice, Palma, Paris, Perpignan, Rennes and Salzburg (from 15th December, Saturdays only).

My kind of town

NEIL OLIVER

WORDS BY DAN SAVERY PICTURES BY GETTY

We catch up with the archaeologist and presenter of BBC's *Coast* to chat about life in Stirling, near Glasgow, and Scottish history

Were you surprised at the success of Coast?
Absolutely. Everybody involved with it was surprised how popular it became, almost instantly. I think it really struck a chord with people of all ages and of both sexes, and it was quite timely. Recently there's been a lot of pessimistic news about climate change and global warming. I think *Coast* was a very straightforward, uplifting look at this country.

What were the main highlights for you when filming the series?
I was particularly pleased to have 24 hours on a nuclear submarine with HMS *Vanguard*. And I've always been very fascinated by lighthouses and was lucky enough to spend a night at Smalls Lighthouse in Pembrokeshire.

Where are the best beaches in Britain?
If you get the weather, the Western Isles of Scotland, somewhere like Barra or Mingulay.

Where did you spend your childhood?
I was born in Renfrew, just outside Glasgow, and I grew up in Dumfries, where I studied archaeology.

What is the best thing about living in Stirling?
It's a very beautiful town. It has a fantastic castle with a lot of history attached to it. Stirling is geographically at the heart of Scotland, not far from Glasgow. It's also at the heart of Scottish history. So many major events have happened nearby, including the Battle of Bannockburn and the rise of heroes like William Wallace and Robert the Bruce. Kings James IV and James V physically shaped Stirling Castle (pictured above), and they were figures that elevated Scotland from being a backwater to being right at the heart of Europe in the 16th century.

Why is archaeology important to us today?
I think an understanding of history is vital. History has a great deal to tell us about the present. With archaeology you have physical contact with the past. History is more about documents, but archaeology is about looking at the things people leave behind, both intentionally or unintentionally. Archaeology is the physical remains of people, the things they made and used; it's a much more direct form of history than reading a letter or diary.

How can people find out more?
There are many ways to get into these subjects without having to go back to full-time education. Wherever you live in Britain, you will not be far from a local history society or a branch of the Young Archaeologists' Club.

How would you spend your perfect day?
I've got two kids, aged four and two, and so any spare time I get I like to spend with them.

What projects are you working on at the moment?
I'm currently working on a series called *The One Show* for BBC One. I've just filmed a documentary for BBC Four about the largest Neolithic monument in Europe, and another one for BBC Northern Ireland about the Spanish Armada. I'm also writing a history book for Penguin.

What are the three most important things you pack in your luggage?
A mobile phone, a good waterproof and stout boots. I never go anywhere without my big boots!

FLY
Flybe has regular flights to Glasgow from Belfast, Birmingham, Exeter, Jersey, Manchester, Norwich and Southampton.

A PLACE IN THE SUN

Mission to Marrakech

IN THE 1960S, BOHEMIANS JOURNEYED TO MARRAKECH TO EXPERIENCE NORTH AFRICA AT ITS MOST MYSTERIOUS. NOWADAYS, IT'S A MAGNET FOR ADVENTUROUS PROPERTY INVESTORS. WE TOOK RUTH PEPPER TO THE 'RED CITY' TO DRINK MINT TEA AND CHECK OUT THE LIE OF THE LAND

WORDS **DAN SAVERY** PICTURES **LEWIS HOUGHTON**

Ask any experts in overseas property for their top five investment hotspots and Morocco is likely to crop up again and again. This North African country is experiencing a major image change – and nowhere is this more apparent than in the city of Marrakech.

Little wonder, then, that our house-hunter, Ruth Pepper, heard about Marrakech through the grapevine. "I've heard the market here is really opening up. Friends have told me it's a city that's primed for investment."

Morocco is ranked as the fifth largest economic power in Africa – after South Africa, Algeria, Egypt and Nigeria. The current monarch, King Mohammed VI, makes no bones about his number one priority – increased tourism.

However, at the moment, Marrakech is a city where great luxury co-exists with considerable poverty, and where the future collides with the past. The heart of Marrakech is the medina – an almost Biblical walled city composed of a labyrinth of narrow streets shared by taxis, bicycles, motorbikes, horses, mules, plus thousands of pedestrians wandering through the *souks* (markets). The focus of the city is the Place Djemaa el-Fna – said to be the busiest square in Africa – where each day drummers, snake-charmers and market traders whip up a frenzy of Arabic activity.

"Marrakech is an assault on the senses," says Ruth. "It's just so full of life and colour. Probably the best thing about it is the people – they're so hard-working, determined and positive."

Life for the locals is based around religion. There are a number of beautiful mosques scattered across the medina, none more impressive than the towering Koutoubia. Followers of Islam must pray five times a day towards Mecca and this call to prayer can be heard each morning at 5.30am with the chant of "Allah Akhbar" ("God is great").

"This is the first time I have spent any time in a Muslim country and I'm very impressed with how it functions," says Ruth. "It is totally different to what we know, but there's a strong

THE BRIEF: Ruth Pepper is looking to invest in Morocco and is interested in a three or four-bed property in the bustling city of Marrakech...

Above: Ruth enjoys a small glass of red wine against the backdrop of Place Jemaa el Fna

Above right: snake-charmers go about their business in the square

moral standard running through it."

The locals are very helpful and, despite what you may have heard, the medina is a safe place for women. As one local market trader told us: "This is not Iraq". But there are problems. Morocco's infrastructure still needs time to develop and some tourists will get a culture shock. "People work very hard to make a little bit of money. It's sad when you see those that aren't able to work barely getting by," says Ruth.

Back in the UK, she is a marketing and promotions manager who also dabbles in property. She is particularly interested in interior design and loves the Moroccan style of furniture.

In the past ten years, she's teamed up with friends and renovated a few properties in Scotland, then sold them on. She now lives in a Victorian terrace in Portobello, on Scotland's east coast, but is itching to invest overseas.

Ruth spent six years living in Athens, and feels this broadened her horizons and made her "aware of what it's like to live in another culture, away from the comfort-zone of the UK." She says she wouldn't buy in the Greek capital because it's too polluted – instead, she is turning her attention to Eastern Europe and North Africa.

This is Ruth's first trip to Morocco and she is looking for a three or four-bed property to use for holiday lets. She might also want to spend a few weeks a year at the property with friends and family. She is flexible on location, but is looking for an easy investment that could house large groups of people.

Marrakech is becoming expensive, but Ruth's budget of around £200,000 should be enough to show her a good selection of properties.

"It's easy to get bamboozled by the constant movement in this city, the hustle and bustle," says Ruth. "So I'm going to keep an open mind and give it time." Read on to find out what hidden gems we found for her in Marrakech...

A Place in the Sun's Morocco Guide

ESSENTIAL GUIDE: the basic facts, figures and highlights of Marrakech

THE PLACE

Rabat may be Morocco's capital, but Marrakech is its heartbeat. The city makes a great base for further exploration, as it's located near the Atlas Mountains, the Sahara Desert and the Atlantic Ocean.

The medina (old city) merges Arabic, West African and French influences and there are so many food stalls and restaurants that the city feels like one giant barbecue. The smell of burning food permeates the streets and you're never far from a cafe that serves mint tea, tajine and cous cous.

HISTORY

Centuries before Marrakech existed, this part of North Africa was home to a number of tribes known as 'Berbers' (meaning 'those who were not Arabs'). Founded in 1062, 'Marrakech' – derived from Berber words meaning 'land of God' – was the capital of an enormous empire that spread from Spain to Sudan in the 11th and 12th centuries.

In the 19th century, the French and Spanish controlled large parts of Morocco, but in March 1956 they signed an agreement granting the country full independence.

WHERE TO GO

The Koutoubia Mosque dominates the Red City's skyline and the mayhem of Place Djemaa el-Fna is at its core. Other places of interest include the Bahia Palace, the Majorelle Garden and Marrakech Museum. Most hotels offer excursions to the Atlas Mountains and the seaside town of Essaouira (where rock star Jimi Hendrix used to hang out).

CLIMATE

Marrakech has long hot summers with temperatures in July and August reaching over 40°C (104°F). The best time to visit is in spring or autumn, but evenings can be cold, so you'll need to pack warm clothes. The wettest part of the year is November to January, when strong rains cause bad driving conditions in the Atlas Mountains.

GETTING THERE

Marrakech is served by Ménara International Airport and is part of the EU 'Open Skies' regime thus opening the floodgates for no-frills carriers. Passengers can choose between RyanAir, Thomson Fly, easyJet and Atlas Blue. Morocco can also be accessed by ferry from Spain. Work on a 39-km tunnel between Spain and Tangier is due to start shortly.

PROPERTY 1

Stylish designer house
From €280,000 (£188,800)

PROPERTY 2

Riad Anochka
€260,000 (£175,345)

PROPERTY 3

Palatial villa
€260,000 (£175,345)

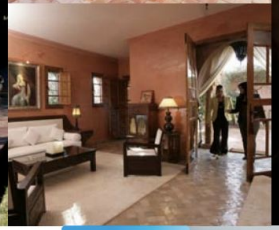
PROPERTY 4

Riad Ruth?
€320,000 (£215,640)

PROPERTY 5

Riad Isabelle
€320,000 (£215,640)

“MARRAKECH IS A FAVOURITE SPOT FOR CELEBS. RICHARD BRANSON AND YVES SAINT LAURENT OWN PROPERTIES IN THE CITY, AND THE BECKHAMS HAVE SPENT WEEKENDS THERE”



I LOVE...

"This property is decked out with beautiful furniture and the decor is out of this world. I really like the setting in the Palmaie – it makes a big contrast to being in the chaos of the medina. The Palmery is very quiet and relaxing, but it's also close enough to the city centre. The entire design and layout of the property is well-thought-out. I love the central courtyard and the siesta room. It is a very good price for what you get and it would fit in with my plans nicely, as I think it could be easily rented out."

I HATE...

"My only concern would be that, although it has the feel of a traditional riad, it is set on a new-build resort. But I think all the resort facilities would appeal to the British market."

I RATE 7/10

PROPERTY 1

Stylish designer house

From €280,000 (£188,800)

Where: Near La Palmeraie

Property details:

- three bedrooms
- three bathrooms
- fully-fitted kitchen
- Moroccan lounge
- dining area
- galleries
- central courtyard with plunge pool
- balcony with views of the Atlas Mountains
- communal swimming pool surrounded by 250 palm trees
- air-conditioning with heating

For more details:
Contact South Invest: 020 7691 2195; www.south-invest.co.uk.

Teatime in the pleasure dome

Our first property is set in the elegant surroundings of La Palmeraie (palm grove), on the outskirts of Marrakech. We wanted to start our viewing trip with something special and show Ruth a new property in one of Marrakech's finest developments – Dar Lamia.

However, the site is still under construction – completion is expected in July 2008 – so this house is a show-home set in an older resort built by the same developer. It's owned by the resort's French architect, Patrick Abes, and its style will be replicated at Dar Lamia. This part of Marrakech is incredibly peaceful compared to the madness of the medina.

Celine Serna from South Invest tells us that 46 houses are being built at Dar Lamia; prices range from €280,000 to €520,000 (£192,000-£356,365) for four-bedroom properties. The resort's theme is 'fire and water', with each home having a grand fireplace and a pool in the central courtyard.

The exterior walls are in keeping with the vivid colour of Marrakech itself – it's often called 'The Red City'. The walls are covered in shining *tadelakt*, a smooth plaster that is polished by a river stone, while the tiling on the walls and floors is called *zellige*. These tiles are made in Fez and cut by hand.

However, these properties are all about the interior design. All around the house, there are fantastic spaces to unwind. These include the galleries – a three-metre-wide corridor next to the pool, a salon (Moroccan lounge) and even a little corner especially designed for a siesta! Moroccan families tend to eat their dinner on small separate tables, which we use here to enjoy cups of refreshing mint tea.

Special mention has to be given to the master bedroom, which has a domed roof and a beautiful en-suite bathroom.

"DEVELOPERS CAN OFTEN OFFER FURNITURE PACKAGES, HELP WITH OPENING A BANK ACCOUNT AND FIND AN INDEPENDENT TRANSLATOR FOR THE SIGNATURE OF THE DEED"

This show-house provides a foretaste of Dar Lamia's elegance and comfort. Tiddles certainly likes it...

A touch of French class

Hidden in the labyrinth of narrow backstreets that wind their way through the medina, this property gives us a taste of the old Morocco.

A riad is a traditional Moroccan property set around an interior garden or courtyard. Many are now used as hotels and provide a peaceful interlude from the hustle and bustle on the street. From outside, most look like an ordinary door in an alleyway, but when you step inside you enter an oasis of peace and tranquillity.

The riad's inward-looking aspect means that much of the property is covered in shade and remains cool. It also means that your home is private, but as soon as you step outside your door you are open to your neighbour.

Most riads are given female names. This one is called 'Riad Anochka' and was renovated two years ago. It is difficult to obtain detailed records of old riads in Marrakech, but it is thought Anochka originally dates from the early 19th century.

Today, the riad has a French owner, who lets it out to guests. The decor has a colonial feel – not surprising when you think that, 100 years ago, the French controlled large parts of the country, and their influence is still very much a part of this city.

This property comprises four bedrooms and three bathrooms, so Ruth could use it as a small guesthouse. Our agent, Christine Hilton, tells us that the high tourist season is March to July, as August is too hot.

The interior decor is simple but sophisticated. Much of the furniture is made from carved cedarwood. Here in Marrakech, the talented craftsmen and women who make these furnishings and rugs are nicknamed 'Berber Picassos', with no two styles being the same.

The crowning glory is the rooftop terrace, with covered and open areas.

PROPERTY 2

Riad Anochka

€260,000 (£175,345)

Where: In the heart of the medina

Property details:
- four bedrooms
- three bathrooms
- Moroccan lounge
- dining room
- courtyard with pool
- shaded patio
- kitchen
- sun terrace with outdoor furniture

For more details:
Contact Residence Maroc: 01491 835222; www.residence-maroc.co.uk.

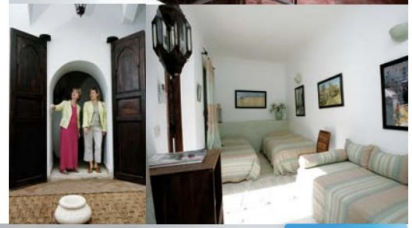
I LOVE...

"I like the fact that you could put your own mark on this riad. It could be lovely with a bit of TLC. At the moment, it works well as a guesthouse, and there are people here who could manage the rentals. I think it could be fantastic: it's very near the souk and right in the middle of the old city."

I HATE...

"My concern would be getting people to and from the riad. You would always need to have somebody here that could collect visitors from the airport and babysit anyone coming on holiday. It's another cost that would have to be factored in."

I RATE 7/10

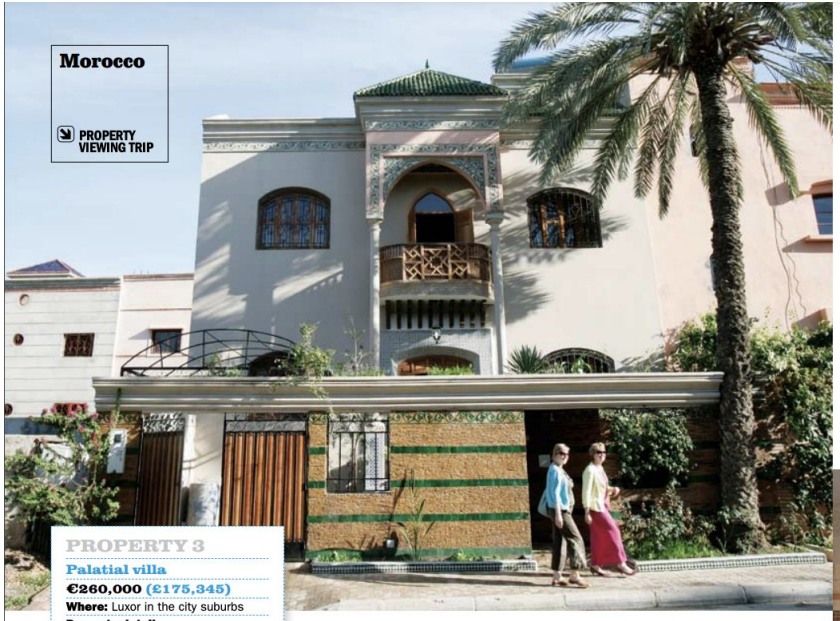


The kitchen is simple but sophisticated, like the rest of the rooms in this riad

"IF RUTH LIKES THIS PROPERTY SHE WILL NEED TO MAKE A VERBAL OFFER. BUT, UNLIKE IN THE SOUKS, BUYERS WILL BE LUCKY TO GET ANY SORT OF REDUCTION ON THE OFFICIAL ASKING PRICE"

Morocco

PROPERTY VIEWING TRIP



PROPERTY 3

Palatial villa

€260,000 (£175,345)

Where: Luxor in the city suburbs

Property details:
- huge semi-detached villa
- six-seven bedrooms
- four bathrooms
- basement kitchen
- bibliotheque (library)
- large ground-floor living space
- small rear patio garden
- roof terrace with pool and fountain
- hammam (Moroccan sauna)
- views of the Atlas Mountains
- air-conditioning with heating

For more details:
Contact Residence Maroc: 01491 835222; www.residence-maroc.co.uk

A villa fit for a king

This is one of the most extraordinary properties *A Place in the Sun* has ever visited. Set on three floors, it's a seven-bedroom house that is so spectacular it could be a mini-palace. And what's even more amazing is that it costs under £180,000.

We picked this villa to show Ruth something completely different to a riad. This property is 15 minutes from the medina, in an opulent suburban area called Luxor, (after Egypt's Valley of the Kings). Luxor is home to lots of wealthy academics from Morocco and Europe. This neighbourhood is dotted with grand villas and tall palm trees.

The colourful ornate work that decorates this impressive property can be seen from outside. The first-floor balcony is supported by two tall pillars and features the intricate ceramic work called 'platre traditionel'.

Inside, the distinctly Arabic flavour is enhanced by the use of *tadelakt* and hand-cut tiles from Fez. Interestingly, our agent says that green tiles signify wealth in Morocco. You would have thought that such intricate craftwork dates back centuries, but in fact this villa was completed in 2007.

It is unfurnished, but it does have kitchen cupboards and some of the bedrooms have built-in wardrobes. Unusually, the air-conditioning comes through disguised gaps between the ceiling tiles. There is also a fireplace, as it can get cold in this city. We're told that it's always 5°C (41°F) cooler here than in the medina. The entire house is heated by a solar panel on the roof.

The terrace has unobstructed views of the magnificent snow-capped Atlas Mountains, just an hour away by car. It also has a *hammam* – a sauna, heated underneath by firewood, which is said to be extremely good for the skin.

This villa has a huge amount of living space. But what does Ruth think of it?

"THE COST OF LIVING AND THE COST OF LABOUR IN MOROCCO IS MUCH CHEAPER THAN IN EUROPE. IT'S AROUND 30 PER CENT CHEAPER FOR FOOD AND ALCOHOL THAN IN THE UK"

Hand-crafted tiles from Fez adorn the water fountain in the back yard

I LOVE...

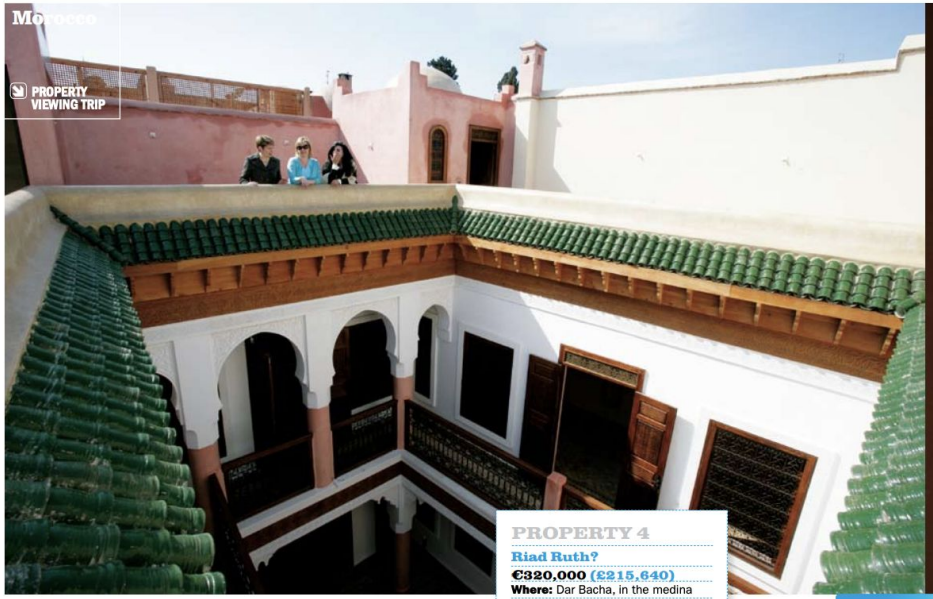
"I like the access to this villa. It's near the medina, but in a nice quiet area. It's a huge house and they say you can get €2,000 for monthly rentals here, which is great. I like the Moroccan style and every single room has wonderful craftsmanship of some kind."

I HATE...

"It's probably too large to be used as a holiday let, as it wouldn't be suitable for small families. The sensible option would be to rent it out to a big Moroccan family, but I don't know enough about renting to the local market – I'd need more information on that. Unfortunately, this doesn't really fit in with my plans."

I RATE 6/10

PROPERTY VIEWING TRIP



The riad with no name

Property four is located in a part of the city called Dar Bacha. This is a quieter section of the medina, away from the chaos of the souks and very near the Royal Palace. A number of riads in this area are being used as guesthouses, so it's a popular place for tourists.

The property is a one-minute walk from a tourist drop-off point and taxi rank, so it is easily accessible. The agent tells us that this riad was sold to a French buyer 18 months ago, who renovated the property and now wants to sell it on. This is clearly a good way of making a profit here.

Unusually, this riad has no name, so if she wanted to buy it, it could be called 'Riad Ruth'! As soon as we step through the door, we can see that it's been beautifully restored throughout. Cedarwood, *tadelakt* and mosaic tiles from Fez add touches of colour to the otherwise plain white and pink walls. The property dates from the 19th century and feels like a piece of Moroccan history. If it was in the UK it would probably be used as a museum or gallery, but here it's just another riad.

The central courtyard is based around a small but deep plunge pool. The wall behind is decorated with an olive tree motif and a regal fountain. There is a tiny box room underneath where you can turn the pool into a Jacuzzi and switch the fountain on.

There are three narrow rooms that can be used as a lounge, three en-suite bedrooms and two extra shower rooms. One of these is on the roof terrace, so you can cool down after an afternoon's sunbathing. From the terrace, you can look down through the whole riad or gaze across the rooftops of the 'Red City' at the hustle and bustle below.

PROPERTY 4

Riad Ruth?

€320,000 (£215,640)

Where: Dar Bacha, in the medina

Property details:
- unfurnished riad
- renovated in 2006/2007
- three bedrooms
- five bathrooms
- kitchen
- central courtyard with pool
- Moroccan lounge
- dining room
- roof terrace

For more details:
Contact Francophiles: 01622 688165; www.francophiles.co.uk.

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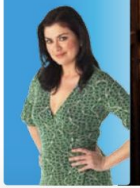
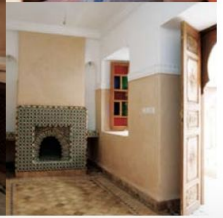


The characteristically Moroccan *tadelakt* finish lends the walls a terracotta-like hue



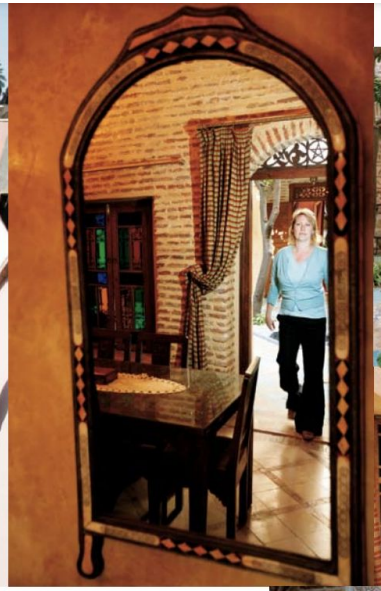
I LOVE...

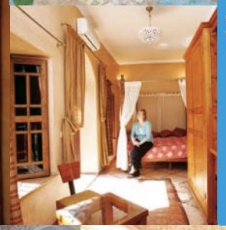
"This is in a good area and is more accessible than the other riads we've seen. You could almost get a car up to the front door. I think it's perfect for holiday lets – it's close to the palace and there certainly seems to be lots of tourists staying round here. I think it would be fun to kit it out with furniture, plants and so on."

I HATE...

"The rooms are quite small and narrow, and I think it's a bit expensive for just the three bedrooms. Although I suppose the price is higher because it's been renovated so beautifully."

I RATE 8/10





"RENOVATION PROJECTS MAY COME WITHOUT TITLE DEEDS, SO A NOTAIRE HAS TO TRACK DOWN EACH FAMILY MEMBER TO GET THEIR CONSENT TO THE SALE"

PROPERTY 5

Riad Isabelle

€320,000 (£215,640)

Where: Dar Bacha, the medina

Property details:
- three bedrooms (all en-suite)
- fountain
- open sitting room (bhou)
- living room
- dining room with fireplace
- fitted kitchen
- cloakroom
- large roof terrace with views of the mosque and Atlas Mountains

For more details:
Francophiles: 01622 688165;
www.francophiles.co.uk.

Under the orange tree

This is our last property in Marrakech, but we wanted to end on a high note – and 'Riad Isabelle' doesn't disappoint. It's a fantastic fully-furnished riad that was renovated three years ago.

This property is once again located in Dar Bacha. We pass from a humble alleyway through a low medieval front door... and enter into another world of sublime peace and quiet.

Each riad is different, and Isabelle's courtyard has a cool, blue feel. Four orange trees provide the shade in the *jardin* (interior garden). Some of the carvings on the walls are Arabic verses from the Koran. Ruth feels at home here, as her favourite colour is turquoise.

The ground floor consists of a *bhou* (open living area), another living room with Moroccan cushions scattered around and a large TV, dining room and a kitchen with an oven, fridge-freezer and washing machine.

The first floor comprises three spacious en-suite bedrooms, one with a glorious four-poster double bed. The roof terrace offers views across the Palace and the nearby mosque, where you can hear the haunting call to prayer five times a day.

The great thing about riads is that even if it rains you can still enjoy your courtyard or *jardin* – all you have to do is pull across the tarpaulin cover.

Another selling point of this property is the *menzeh*, which is a covered corner of the roof terrace, that could be used as another lounge/dining area. The detailed carvings and woodwork add to the authentic Moroccan atmosphere of the place and would definitely appeal to guests.

Our agent tells us that the rental income would be around €1,200 (£820) per week here. The cost of a full-time maid would be just €200 (£140) a month. This sounds like a very low wage by British standards, but in this part of the world it is regarded as a reasonable income.

I LOVE...

"This is lovely. I really like the *jardin* (garden) and the central patio with the water feature. This one comes with all the fixtures and furnishings, which makes life easier. I love the split-level terrace with the *menzeh* (covered area) – it would be a great place to entertain guests. Another plus-point is that the riad could be managed by a Moroccan agent working on my behalf."

I HATE...

"Nothing. It's slightly above my budget, but then it doesn't need any work or furnishings."

I RATE 9/10

Ruth weighs up the pros and cons in the bhou, an open living area off the courtyard

Morocco

PROPERTY VIEWING TRIP

What's the next step?

"The final property fitted in best with my plans – I loved the romantic style of that riad, it was much more accessible than the others I had seen and had been very well renovated. But I need to think harder about the financial situation, as it was over my budget.

"I now realise that you need to employ a manager here. Logistically, you would need to have someone on site to look after the guests.

"However, it has been a helpful trip in showing me what is available and what can be done. For instance, you could buy a riad, do it up and then re-sell it at a profit or you could buy one that's been already renovated and use it as a rental property. This trip has given me a lot of food for thought."

WE NEED YOU!

Are you looking for some expert assistance in finding your place in the sun? If you are interested, e-mail us at ptsmag@brooklandsgroup.com with details of where you are looking, your budget and the type of property you are looking for, as well as your phone number and a recent photo. Successful applicants will be contacted as soon as possible.

BUYING TIPS

Investing in Morocco

THE MARKET

Morocco was one of the hottest property markets of 2006 and this looks set to continue in 2007. Foreign Direct Investment in Morocco has been increasing year on year and rose from $1.07bn (£51,622,000) in 2004 to $2.9bn (£1.49bn) in 2005. In terms of letting your property, demand outstrips supply and Christine Hilton from Residence Maroc reckons you can expect 85 per cent occupancy. Last year many properties rose in value by 30 per cent.

BUYING PROCESS

Property law in Morocco follows the French example. When both purchaser and vendor have signed the *compromis de vente* (preliminary contract), the purchaser pays a ten per cent deposit. On occasions, the notaire will under-declare the sale price to try and save on fees and taxes payable to the government. The real sales figure is written on the deeds, which is the only document that stays on record.

Once the notaire is satisfied about the title and status of the property, they will prepare the final sales contract *(acte de vente)* and notify you of a completion date. From start to finish, this process usually takes two to three months.

EXTRA COSTS

When you buy a property in Morocco you will need to add 5.5 per cent to the purchase price for legal fees and registration taxes. Once you own the property, you will have to pay annual local taxes and you are obliged to insure your house. The maximum rate of Capital Gains Tax is 20 per cent. This reduces to ten per cent after five years and zero after ten years. The good news is that there is no income tax on the first five years of rental and no Inheritance Tax.

MOROCCAN OPTIONS

If Marrakech becomes too pricey, there are other hotspots that are offering affordable properties. New golf and leisure developments are springing up along the Atlantic and Mediterranean coasts in Agadir, Tangier, Taghazout Bay and Mogadar, near Essaouira. Prices vary hugely at these resorts, but it is still possible to track down a small off-plan apartment for under £100,000.

Average property prices

HOUSE: £130,000

APARTMENT: £70,000

RIAD TO RENOVATE: £140,000

FINISHED RIAD: £220,000

MOROCCO IS AIMING TO HAVE 10m TOURISTS PER YEAR BY 2010

SPECIAL REPORT

JET-TO-LET: A PRICE WORTH PAYING?

INTEREST IN OVERSEAS PROPERTY INVESTMENT IS HIGH – BUT, SADLY, SO ARE THE ENVIRONMENTAL COSTS OF AIR TRAVEL. THEN THERE'S FUEL DUTY. SO, WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD?

WORDS **DAN SAVERY** PICTURES **GETTY**

The Wright brothers could not have known the long-term effect they would have on the planet when they invented a flying machine in 1903. Air travel has completely revolutionised the way we experience the world.

More people are flying and buying overseas than ever before. But with newspapers filled with reports of aviation tax, international terrorism, airport delays and global warming, the question is: 'How long can this go on?'

What is jet-to-let?

The term 'jet-to-let' refers to a fairly new trend among buyers. In the mid-1990s, the government introduced buy-to-let mortgages and Britain experienced a buy-to-let boom. As house prices rose, younger investors looked to buy rentable holiday homes abroad. Analysts dubbed these buyers 'the jet-to-let generation'.

Regular flights are vital to jet-to-let buyers. A recent survey by Savills and Holiday-Rentals.co.uk shows that the average price of a property within ten miles of an airport served by a low-cost carrier is 39 per cent higher than properties not on a budget route. "The potential to charge higher weekly rents is enhanced by low-cost airlines," says Jacqui Daly of Savills Research.

There's no doubt about it, owning a holiday home can be a fantastic way to make money – but the flip side is that frequent flying is potentially damaging to the environment. This presents a real dilemma, since getting a foot on the property ladder could mean making a large carbon footprint.

Going green, seeing red

The government's response to talk of carbon footprints and global warming was to hit passengers in their pockets. Last December, Chancellor Gordon Brown doubled air passenger duty, adding £5-£10 to short-haul flights and up to £80 on long-hauls. The International Air Transport Association says Britons are paying the highest airline tax in the world.

But after Brown tried to be green, the airline bosses saw red. First to attack was the founder of easyJet, Sir Stelios Haji-Ioannou, who told *The London Paper*: "The Chancellor went for a fast buck – he's raised £1 billion and it's not earmarked for the environment in any way."

Niall Duffy, Head of PR and Public Affairs at flybe, said the government's

move was little more than a "tax grab". He stated: "It's a tax dressed up as an environment levy, just another way of filling the Chancellor's coffers". Duffy added that flybe is investing £1.2 billion in a new generation of aircraft that will "set new standards in emissions and fuel efficiency".

Not to be outdone, Michael O'Leary, Ryanair's CEO, claims his airline is "Europe's cleanest and greenest" and blithely dismissed the aviation and climate change debate as "hysteria". He stated: "By investing in a fleet of brand-new aircraft, over the past eight years we have reduced our noise and CO_2 emissions by almost 50 per cent."

However, environment minister Ian Pearson went so far as to describe Ryanair as "the irresponsible face of capitalism". The minister is keen to get aviation into a proposed EU emissions trading scheme.

The EU also wants to regulate charges on all airports with more than one million passengers a year, but the European Low Fares Airline Association (ELFAA) – which represents easyJet, flybe, Wizz Air and Ryanair – opposes the move. "ELFAA has repeatedly said that competition, not regulation, should determine the future of Europe's airports," declared the body's Secretary General, John Hanlon.

"It's claimed that planting two new trees would offset CO_2 emissions from a return flight to New York"

Carbon conscience

So, just how big is the effect of air travel on the environment? Well, according to Sir Nicholas Stern's governmental report, aviation only accounts for 1.6 per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions. This doesn't seem like much on the surface, but environmentalists say the actual impact is far greater due to the altitude at which the fuel is emitted.

A study by Oxford University's Environmental Change Institute found that air travel accounts for 5.5 per cent of UK carbon emissions. "Proportionally, we are second only to the US in the amount of flying we do," says Richard Dyer from Friends of the Earth. "The main problem is the rate of growth."

Britain's CO_2 emissions from aircraft doubled between 1990 and 2000, and the government predicts that they will double again by 2030. The increasing number of flights from regional airports, the decision to go ahead with a third runway at Heathrow and plans for a second runway at Stansted will continue this expansion.

"The growth predictions of air travel are linked to the increase in second homes and leisure travel," says Dyer. "If we are going to tackle climate change, then we will have to make the alternatives better."

One solution that is popular with Tony Blair is carbon offsetting, which is where individuals contribute to various eco-friendly projects. At www.climatecare.org, you can calculate your carbon emissions by typing in the details of your journey. According to them, to offset the 1.56 tons of CO_2 emitted from a return flight to New York, you'd need to plant two trees.

But Friends of the Earth insists that offsetting addresses the symptoms, not the cause of the problem. "It's better than doing nothing," says Dyer, "but offsetting is a dangerous thing to promote – it gives the impression that it's all you need to do. We should look hard at cutting emissions at source."

Future fuel

One way of cutting emissions is to change the fuel used. Enter Richard Branson, owner of Virgin Atlantic, who pledged to invest $3 billion (£1.53 billion) in renewable energy over the next decade. "We must rapidly wean ourselves off our dependence on coal and fossil fuels," he declared at last year's Clinton Global Initiative.

The billionaire generously pledged to put all profits from his air and rail companies over the next ten years into a new company called Virgin Fuels. Much of the investment will focus on biofuels, an alternative to oil-based options. But recent studies have shown that fuels such as biodiesel, which come from plants like rape seed, are not as carbon-friendly as we think. The amount of land needed to grow the crop could increase deforestation and the use of fertilisers and pesticides.

However, there's already talk of a second generation of biofuels made from sources such as straw, timber and manure. Denmark is at the forefront of this development and construction has already begun on what will be Europe's largest biorefinery. This kind of fuel could potentially make Europe less reliant on oil from the Middle East.

Long-haul living

One thing's for sure – more and more people are buying abroad. In fact, nearly 200,000 Brits moved overseas in 2005. According to Public Policy Research (IPPR), 5.5 million Brits now live abroad on a permanent basis, which could mean a reduction in regular short-haul flights.

I BELIEVE I CAN FLY...

Bargaintastic Bulgaria, sunny Cyprus, tropical Cape Verde, mysterious Morocco – all accessible destinations where you could snap up a property and rent it out. Then there's the Malaysian long shot...

BULGARIA

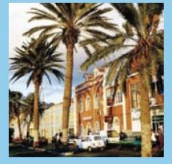
Regular British Airways flights to Sofia (at around £130 return) and low property prices have turned resorts such as Bansko and Pamporovo into some of the most popular ski-to-let destinations in Europe.

At the present time, no budget operators have secured routes to the Black Sea Coast, but there are seasonal cheap flights to Varna and there's certainly no shortage of developments for investors to choose from. The country's accession to the European Union in January will help improve its infrastructure and benefit its property market.

CYPRUS

Starting from March this year, Monarch Airlines has introduced four times a week budget flights between London Luton and Larnaca airport from just £69. This makes it the first major low-cost airline to introduce flights between the Mediterranean island and the UK.

According to MRI Overseas Property, 11 per cent of people thinking of buying abroad would consider Cyprus. House prices rose by an average of CYP£5,000 (£5,725) last year and the country is set to join the euro in 2008.



CAPE VERDE

Following the introduction of direct flights from Gatwick to the island of Sal last year, the number of visitors to these Atlantic islands is growing at 22 per cent per year, making Cape Verde a fly-to-let hotspot.

Neil Chapman, MD of Teleticket, which runs the flights, says: "We have received so much interest from people wishing to invest in a second home and therefore needing to fly out that we created a second weekly direct flight from Gatwick." The Cape Verde authorities approved investment projects worth over $300m (£153m) in 2006.

MOROCCO

This exotic destination is just a three-hour flight from the UK. Both Ryanair and easyJet fly into Marrakech daily and British Airways fly into Tangiers, where two or three-bedroom villas can be bought for around £100,000.

Visitor figures are set to reach 10 million before the country's acceptance in the Euro-Med free-trade zone in 2010. An 'Afrotunnel' will link the country to Spain and there are a variety of investment opportunities, from golf developments to coastal resorts and traditional riads.

KUALA LUMPUR, MALAYSIA

If Richard Branson's plans to introduce a low-cost long-haul airline manage to take off, then Kuala Lumpur – or KL as it likes to be known – could become Europe's gateway to Asia. This vibrant modern metropolis is at the forefront of Malaysia's march of progress.

In 2005, prices there rose about ten per cent and it already has a booming buy-to-let market. It's still possible to get a one-bedroom serviced apartment there from as little as £80,000. Expats in the city account for one in 11 of all adults, and many look to rent, at least to begin with.

Long-haul carriers have also been cutting their prices to compete with budget airlines. Last year, new carrier Oasis Air offered London Gatwick to Hong Kong flights from £75.

More recently, Richard Branson has been in talks with a no-frills Malaysian carrier to set-up a low-cost airline to Asia. Prices to Kuala Lumpur could cost as little as £43, depending on when passengers book. This would give Virgin a gateway to hundreds more routes, connecting Britain with the booming economies of Malaysia, India and China.

"The overseas property trend for 2007 is likely to be in what we call the 'long-haul-to-let' market," says Clinton O'Neill of financial services provider Baydonhill. "Branson's announcements of low-cost flights to Asia could be a driver of property investment abroad, especially in countries outside Europe. The recent strength of pound sterling against the US dollar has also had people looking west."

Short breaks to long-haul locations like Dubai and New York went up 35 per cent last year, according to Lastminute.com. Perhaps this gives an indication of the changing trends of tourists and overseas investors, with buyers looking further afield.

However, if the kind of chaos that engulfed Heathrow last summer recurs in future, passengers could be tempted back closer to home. Already transport companies such as P&O Ferries and Eurostar have upped their game, offering cheaper tickets and better facilities to lure back customers.

Whatever happens in the aviation industry, it's certainly an exciting time to be a jet-to-let investor. Whether or not the boom proves to be sustainable remains to be seen. But one thing's for sure – what happens in the skies will effect where we buy on the ground.

"In the next ten years or so, what happens in the skies is likely to determine where we buy on the ground"

WILL THE JET-TO-LET PHENOMENON LAST?

We asked four Brits about the future of air travel...

Dominic Farrell, Editor of *Jet-to-Let* magazine:
"People fly for business, pleasure and for second homes – these reasons won't change. Economically, there's an inelastic demand when prices rise due to tax hikes. Some people will be prevented from travelling, but I think it will be a small proportion because demand for air travel is not price-sensitive. Governments may look more towards reducing emissions from cars, power stations and factories."

James Davies, International Director of Hamptons International:
"This generation has travelled much more than our parents or grandparents ever dreamed of. It's almost like a golden age. Increased competition has made it cheaper to travel than it was ten years ago. You can fly to Marrakech, for £60 these days. To be honest, £10 on top of that – or £40 on a long-haul flight that costs over £500 – won't make much difference."

Dr Dan Barlow, Head of Policy for WWF Scotland:
"People now recognise the significance of climate change, but we need to take action to tackle it – and that includes reducing emissions from aviation. We advise second-home owners to consider how often they need to go abroad, whether it's several times a year or for one longer period. Also, many places in Europe are easily accessible by train and ferry, which have less impact on climate change."

Scott Smerald, civil servant for HM Revenue & Customs:
"The sheer numbers of people who travel, especially with the rise of low-cost airlines, has to reach a peak at some stage – and the environmental cost has to be taken seriously. However, I can't see climate change stopping people leaving the country. Emigration is about permanently improving your standard of living, whereas I think investing is more about making a quick buck."

Left: a postcard of the watermill shortly after it was built

Main picture: the house as it is today

Below left: Trisha admires her handiwork

Below right: the giant waterwheel

Love at first sight

WHEN TRISHA MASON STUMBLED ACROSS AN OLD WATERMILL IN THE HEART OF THE FRENCH COUNTRYSIDE, SHE FELL HEAD-OVER-HEELS IN LOVE. MANY YEARS OF RENOVATION WORK LATER, SHE'S THE OWNER OF AN IDYLLIC HOME

WORDS **DAN SAVERY** PICTURES **TRISHA MASON/VEF**

Recognise it? This magnificently restored watermill in central France is a celebrity in its own right. It's been featured on TV, as well as numerous property pages and websites. It's even depicted on a stained-glass window in the local church. It's a special place with an amazing story – and who better to tell us about it than its current owner, Trisha Mason?

Trisha first came across the mill, called 'Le Moulin des Combes', on a family holiday in the Limousin region of France in 1987. "I wasn't looking to buy a property," she says. "In fact, it was the last thing in the world I wanted to do."

However, destiny intervened and Trisha was struck by Cupid's arrow. "I fell in love with a house that just happened to be in France. I would have bought it wherever it was," she says.

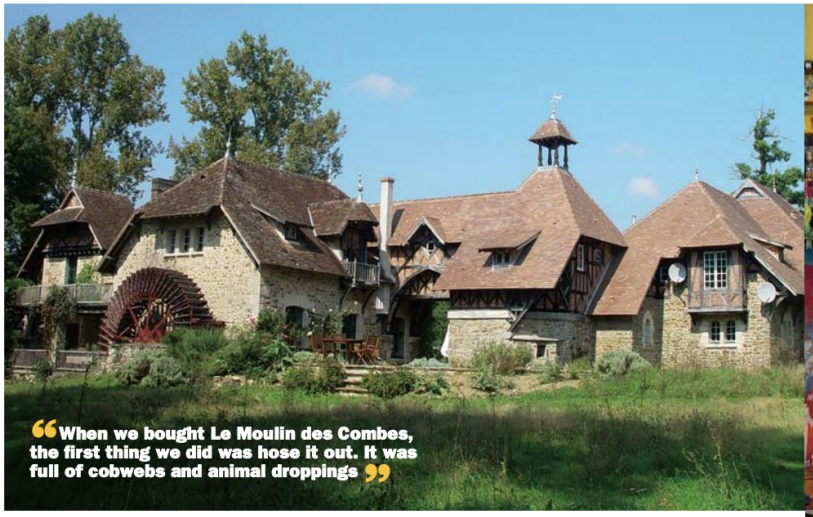
Back in 1987, the mill was completely overgrown. It had been empty for nigh-on 50 years, there was no electricity, no running water and there weren't many doors and windows left intact.

"I spotted the spire from the bell-tower above a forest of trees," recalls Trisha, "and I could hear the sound of running water. I went to find out where it was coming from – and an enormous building suddenly emerged from the undergrowth."

In fact, it had been hidden there for the previous half-century. "It was just sitting there, tired and unloved, waiting for me!" she laughs.

Set in the heart of the Limousin countryside, near the little village of Châteauponsac, the watermill was built 120 years ago by a rich Parisian family. They built three properties, one for each of their sons – the mill was the second project. Limousin was chosen because it was said to have the best hunting and fishing in France.

Over time, the family abandoned the mill, and when Germany occupied France in the Second World War it became a hub of local Resistance activity. "There is evidence that the underground operated here sometime during the war," explains Trisha. "We



“When we bought Le Moulin des Combes, the first thing we did was hose it out. It was full of cobwebs and animal droppings”

MY PLACE
TRISHA MASON

What: A magnificent watermill separated into two three-bedroom dwellings, with acres of woodland.

Where: The property is near Châteauponsac, Limousin in central/southern France.

How much: Trisha bought ‘Le Moulin des Combes’ in 1987 for the equivalent of £50,000.

Current value: Now, after more than 15 years of renovation work, she is selling the property for €950,000 (£646,930).

And now: Trisha runs her own business specialising in French property – VEF (www.vefuk.com).

found several objects hidden under the floorboards. When we took them along to the museum, they were identified as standard kit for English paratroopers.”

The mill was abandoned again after the war and remained a ruin until Trisha came along and gave it the kiss of life. However, in Shakespeare’s words, “The course of true love never did run smooth” – and the renovation took an incredible 15 years to finish.

“The first thing we did was to get water from the supply outside in the street and hose the whole place out,” says Trisha. “The house was covered in cobwebs and animal droppings. Trust me, it takes a long time to hose down a house. When it had dried out, we painted everything white.”

All the renovation work was done on a very tight budget, with Trisha calling on different generations of her family to help out. Her father, who was in his 80s, worked alongside a builder, and Trisha’s daughter (who was 14 at the time) got electricity going in the house – incredibly, she learnt how to do this from a library book.

At this early stage, they still had to shower in the garden. Every obstacle overcome was a significant step forward. For instance, there was a small celebration on the day they got their first light bulb working.

As family and friends joined in, the work became fun. Each school holiday Trisha would go down to France and do a bit more. “We used to work all morning and then we’d have lunch, knock off and go to the lakes for a swim,” she says. “Then, in the evening, we’d have dinner together and be up early next morning to start work again.”

Some people make the mistake of throwing too much money at projects when they start off, but Trisha’s budget was so small that this was not a temptation. “In any case, your ideas change when you live in a property,” she says. “The last thing we did was replace the wood on the big waterwheel and that was actually the most expensive job of all as regards materials.”

The watermill is still in working order, and the gentle stream that runs through the property ends up in the River Loire. The mill sits in the valley (hence it’s name, which translates as ‘The Mill of the Valleys’), with woodlands sloping up to hills at the top, where you can often see deer and wildfowl. The property also includes a large, well-tended garden and about ten acres of woodland.

The property is split into two separate dwellings – an east and west wing, joined at first-floor level by a bridge. In each of the dwellings there are three en-suite bedrooms, large kitchen/dining rooms, living rooms and library/games rooms. There is also a separate one-bed caretaker’s house, with its own living room and kitchen.

It’s an enormous property, perfect for large groups of people looking to wind-down in beautiful surroundings and enjoy an idyllic country holiday.

Trisha describes the interior decor as “in keeping with the English Arts and Crafts movement. Stencilled vines creep across the walls and each room has its own individual style.”

Trisha’s hard work has obviously paid off. When she bought the mill in 1987 (in francs), it cost the equivalent of £50,000. Now, it’s worth in the region of €950,000 (£646,930).

Not surprisingly, Trisha believes that, if you buy the right property and are prepared to put the work in, France is a great place to invest. “This place would have cost a lot more if we had paid builders to do what we did,” she says. “The hardest thing of all was dealing with French bureaucracy – but I eventually learnt how to do that by trial and error.”

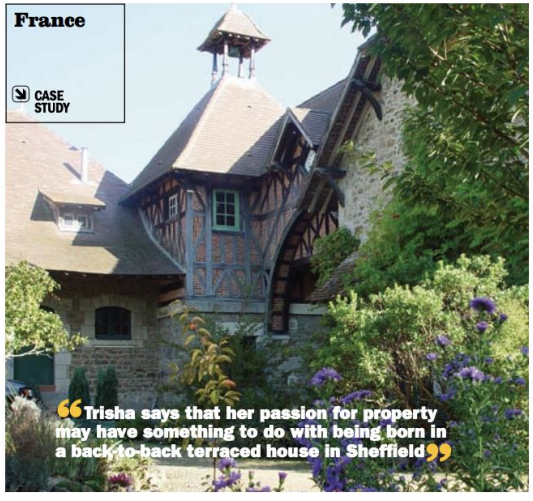
Little did she know at the time, but the mill was just the start of Trisha’s career in French property. Within three months of buying the mill, people started asking her to find properties for them. In the last six months of 1987, she helped six members of her friends and family buy property, and by 1988 she had her own company –

Facing page: the property is set in two acres of well-tended gardens and surrounded by woods

Clockwise from bottom right: a disused waterwheel takes pride of place in the sitting room; the restored fireplace adds a touch of grandeur; warm tones make this bedroom both cosy and sensual; the classic country-style kitchen; stylish simplicity is the order of the day in the attic bedroom

France

CASE STUDY



> "Trisha says that her passion for property may have something to do with being born in a back-to-back terraced house in Sheffield"

VEF (Vivre En France). It's now one of the leading French property specialists.

Trisha says the key to her success is "loving people and loving property" and the fact that she "never gives up". She admits that she is "totally and utterly addicted to renovation" – her new project is restoring a big old farmhouse, with a vineyard and olive grove in Avignon.

However, it wasn't always like this. Trisha came from relatively humble beginnings. She says that her passion for property may have something to do with being born in a gloomy back-to-back terraced house in Sheffield."

Before getting into property, Trisha had her own company manufacturing clothes. "I ran my own business from the age of 24," she says, "then I got into property management in east London and started to build a portfolio of properties." At the moment, she spends most of her time in her London or Dublin offices, but manages to get out to France every weekend.

Trisha has two grown-up children. Her daughter now lives in France and her son in England where he heads VEF's sister company, Validus (www.validus-invest.com), an investment company that specialises in emerging markets.

As one of the leading experts in her field, Trisha is optimistic about the French property market: "Nowadays people can get almost anywhere in France with a cheap airline, so what determines where people buy is budget and climate," she says. "A lot of people are buying new-build and some people are purchasing through the government's leaseback scheme."

Aside from the money to be made, the high quality of life also attracts people to France – and at the heart of *la vie Français* is food. Trisha is a big fan of French cuisine and loves to cook. The Limousin region is well regarded for its beef and trout. "It's different to northern France where everything's laden in butter," she says, "It's good-quality food, simply cooked."

The Limousin is known as the lake district of France. Popular local pastimes include walking, fishing, boating and hunting. If you need to escape the quiet rural life for a while, then Limoges is only half-an-hour away by car. It's a lively university city with a beautiful cathedral, museum, lots of restaurants and its own airport.

It's a wonderful part of the world and Trisha has thoroughly enjoyed her time here. However, all good things must come to an end and she has reluctantly decided it is time to put the mill on the market. A new chapter in its story is about to begin.

Her advice to others looking to buy and renovate a property is: "Don't think, do. It doesn't matter if you make a mistake, just carry on and enjoy life."

For more details

Visit www.luxurymill.com to find out about holidays at the mill; for more information on French property, go to www.vefuk.com

Above: after being unloved for many years, the property has benefited from a healthy dose of TLC

Below: an ideal spot to enjoy some of the fine local cuisine

ESSENTIALS

Top five renovation tips

- Before you start renovation work, it is always worth getting a professional survey of the property. This should prevent any nasty surprises cropping up later.
- It is important to source as much material as possible from local areas. This is not only a cheaper way of obtaining what you need, but it will also help to keep your property looking authentic.
- It can be a mistake to varnish oak beams. Wood expands and contracts with the temperature of the season and cracking can occur.
- Keep the design realistic. It's all too easy to get caught up with ideas of your 'dream' property and go over the top with stylish but impractical features.
- If you wish to dramatically alter the appearance of the outside of your property, you may need to apply for planning permission via a *Certificat d'Urbanisme Positif*.

Searching for INSPIRATION

Nick Thomson is interested in buying a second home in rural Italy – somewhere he can relax, entertain and indulge his love of the arts. We took him round five promising properties in Le Marche in the hope of capturing his imagination...

Words by Dan Savery, pictures by Lewis Houghton

Making the break

Where does a man who has won millions of pounds from playing snooker elect to have his second home? The answer is in one of Western Algarve's hottest new developments. Steve Davis tells *A Place in the Sun* about life beyond the green baize

Words by Dan Savery, pictures by Richard Wadley

Steve Davis is more than a snooker player. He's also a TV pundit known for his quick wit. He has one of the largest soul record collections in Britain and is a keen poker player. In the 1980s he probably spent more time on television than Margaret Thatcher. And now, like so many other Britons, he has a second home in the Algarve. The man that *Spitting Image* ironically labelled 'Mr Interesting' has actually led quite an extraordinary life.

"My life is a strange life," says Steve. "When I'm walking down the street I've got a pretty high recognition factor – it's like a bit of you is public property."

Davis, 47, made his name by winning six world championships, and was runner-up in the classic 1985 final against Dennis Taylor, when a record post-midnight audience of 18 million people stayed up to watch the tense and dramatic black ball decider.

Despite his fame and fortune, Steve Davis has always remained down to earth. "In the 1980s, snooker was flavour of the decade, but I just took everything in my stride," he says. "I didn't really get time to reflect on what a strange life I was leading. I just kept my feet on the ground and played snooker."

Born in South East London and currently living in Essex with his wife Jude and their two children, Davis has made well over £5 million in snooker prize money – earning himself the nickname 'The Nugget'. Although snooker has taken him all over the world, Davis never thought about buying a holiday home until three years ago when he went to Portugal for a European pro-tour event, sponsored by Oceanico Resorts.

Oceanico are one of the biggest property developers in the Western Algarve, with resorts in Lagos and Praia da Luz. Situated just 200 metres from the beach, Estrela da Luz (which means 'Star of Light') is a luxury resort with 146 apartments ranging from studios to penthouses, one of which belongs to Steve.

His penthouse apartment comprises three bedrooms, a fully-fitted kitchen, bathroom, lounge and large covered terrace, offering spectacular views of the sea and the multi-coloured sunsets that the region is famous for.

"It feels like a villa, even though it's an apartment," says Steve. "It's pretty plain but as it's brand new it's very efficient. I'm sure over the years it's bound to change." However, Steve is not terribly interested in home improvements. "I'm not a DIY man at all, I'm at the other end of the spectrum," he says.

Fortunately, Steve won't need to do any work on the apartment. All the properties in the complex are built for comfort, with underfloor heating, subtle tile patterns, double glazing, cavity wall insulation, electric window and door shutters, underground parking and lock-up storage.

Estrela's on-site facilities include an art gallery, a children's play area, tennis court, bar, restaurant, café and three heated swimming pools. Steve doesn't swim but he does use the resort's well-equipped gym. "You don't have to be fit to be a snooker player," he admits, "but for the last few months I've been going to the gym quite a lot."

The resort also has a dedicated Steve Davis Snooker and Games Room, exclusive to

The Estrela da Luz development in the Western Algarve. **Left** Steve is all smiles as he relaxes on his sun terrace

WHERE THE PALM TREES *Sway*

SILICON VALLEY ENTREPRENEUR CHARLIE TRIMBLE LIKES TO TAKE A BREAK FROM SAN FRANCISCO TO ENJOY SOME QUALITY TIME ON HIS PRIVATE ISLAND IN THE BAHAMAS

Words by Dan Savery, pictures by Nicholas Kane/arcaid.co.uk

There aren't many people in the world that can say they have their own island, but Charlie Trimble is one of them. Nestled among large palm trees and surrounded by turquoise waters, his eco-friendly residence – Channel Cay – is the ultimate escape.

This small private island is in the Bahamas, a balmy archipelago where the Atlantic Ocean blends into the warm waters of the Caribbean. It's certainly a far cry from the hi-tech world of San Francisco's Silicon Valley, where Charlie Trimble, 64, made his millions as an electronics mogul.

"I was a Silicon Valley entrepreneur and I found the pace of life in the Bahamas much slower than the San Francisco Bay area," he says. In the 1970s Charlie started an electronics company which was instrumental in developing navigational products by using GPS – Global Positioning System – satellite technology.

"I stepped down in 1998," he says, "but I'm still on the board of a number of small bio-tech companies."

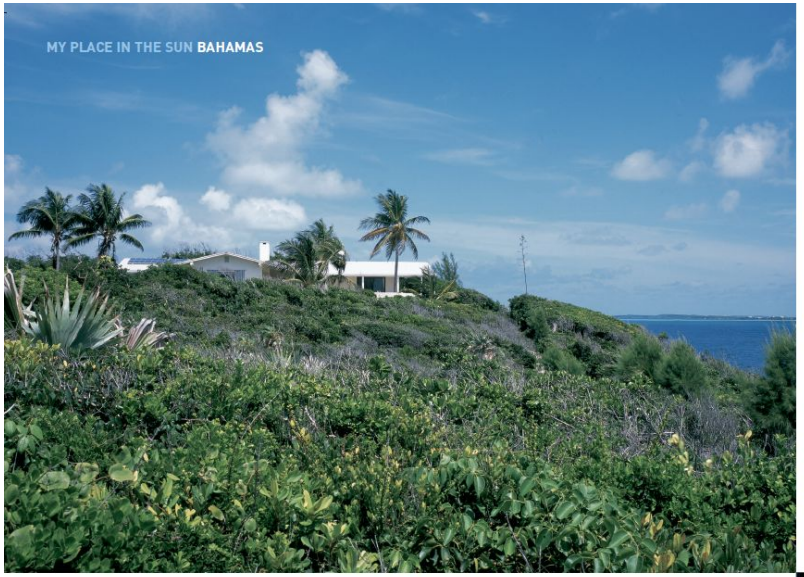
However, when he's not caught up in the business world, Charlie likes nothing more than spending a week on Channel Cay. "I love the sea and the peaceful sound of the waves," he says. "In many ways, it's a relief from the pressures of the world."

There is something magical about living on your own deserted island – perhaps it's the feeling of being stranded, like a latter-day Robinson Crusoe. Yet Channel Cay isn't completely cut-off from civilisation. The island is just an hour's flight from Florida and 25 minutes by boat from Marsh Harbour on the island of Abaco.

Charlie initially heard about Channel Cay when he was on holiday in the Bahamas with his wife Marcia four years ago. "It was a hot day in June and a taxi driver was showing us around," says Charlie. "He started pointing out properties to us – none of which particularly interested us – and then he told us that there was also an island for sale."

Initially, the Trimbles had no intention of finding a property while they were on holiday, but Charlie was so impressed by the 25-acre island and its 300-metre white sand beach that he decided to buy it.

Channel Cay cost several million dollars but, as Charlie points out, "It was still about two-thirds of the price of a plot in the Los Altos Hills in California."



"The electricity is purely solar-driven. We found it was an economical way of going about things. The island runs on about six kilowatts a day"

Charlie Trimble's private island

KEY
1. Dock
2. Beach
3. Fruit tree groves
4. Thatched beach cabana
5. Boat House
6. Shallow water harbour
7. Vegetable garden
8. House
9. Pathways about the island

After purchasing the island, the Trimbles worked hard to make the old beach house as self-sufficient and sustainable as possible.

Charlie describes some of the work he's done on the island as "Egyptian engineering". He explains: "We put in a reverse osmosis system, which has doubled the amount of purified water we have. We've now got 80,000 gallons of water – most of it is primarily rainwater catchment from the main house."

"The electricity is purely solar-driven," he adds. "We found it was an economical way of going about things – the whole island runs on around six kilowatts a day."

Marcia was originally interested in increasing the number of flowering plants and shrubs on the island. This has evolved into the idea of turning the whole island into a nature park with a number of trails and plantations.

The main house was in a habitable condition but the Trimbles have done some renovation work, including putting in a new master bathroom and refitting the kitchen. They have no immediate plans to do any further work on the house – although, as Charlie puts it, "Hurricanes do have a certain way of motivating you to renovate!"

Last year's hurricane season (nicknamed the 'Season of Fury') was one of the worst on record as Wilma and Katrina caused severe destruction to places such as New Orleans and Cancun. Fortunately, the Bahamas was comparatively unscathed. Direct hits are only supposed to come to the area every 30 years but the Bahamas was directly hit in 1999 and again in 2004.

Some people say that this rise in extreme weather conditions is down to climate change caused by global warming, although Charlie remains upbeat about the planet's future. "Things aren't as dire as they are made out to be," he says. "There is an awful lot that can be saved without altering your lifestyle very much."

"The power and drama of nature is half the fun," he adds. "The hurricane last year cut off the top of the foliage – and now we have a 360° view!"

From the veranda Charlie can gaze on the nearby Pelican Cays and the Atlantic, with its gentle waves. It's hard to believe that this is the same ocean that pounds the west coast of Ireland so violently.

Charlie grew up on the Pacific coast, between Los Angeles and Santiago, so has always lived near the ocean. "I absolutely have to have a horizon," he says, describing the Bahamian water he looks out on as "swimming pool-clear, with all shades of greens and blues."

The main house is situated 49 feet above sea level at the highest point of the island. This modest looking white building has thick concrete block interior and exterior walls. The house is surrounded by smooth wooden floor decking and enjoys cool breezes from all directions, so there are very few occasions when the ceiling fan is required.

Inside, the house comprises four bedrooms, three bathrooms and a 1960s-style kitchen, with a small maid's room. The centre of the house is dominated by the main room, which is a massive 40-feet long and 16-feet wide. It encompasses an open-plan living room and dining area, and leads out onto the porch on one side and onto a patio on another.

Charlie describes the interior decor as "a little bit minimalist". Most rooms have white walls and ceramic floor tiles. The bathrooms have slightly different tile patterns, with blue and green aquatic themes.

Many of the paintings that hang on the walls are by local artists. The dining room table was designed by a man called Bill Fuller who spotted the mahogany tree, had it cut down and then seasoned the wood himself.

The beautiful cedar chest was carved by a local sculptor and houses all manner of videos, music and books. Charlie has a large collection of books and says that he spends a fair amount of his time on the island reading.

There are a number of small outbuildings on the island, including a small boathouse on the dock, a hut for the generator, a thatched beach cabana and a caretaker's house. The substantial gardens feature a range of fruit trees, a vegetable patch and a coconut grove. Channel Cay is too small to have a road but there are pathways that lead right around the island.

Today, the Trimbles use Channel Cay as a holiday home but they also rent it out when they're not there. "I promised myself that if I renovated the house then I'd use it," says Charlie. "I tend to go down there for a week around ten times a year. That works well for me."

Charlie doesn't really need the rental income. In fact, he says: "My motivation for sharing the island is that it adds interest for me as the caretaker".

People come from all over North America to spend a week on Channel Cay. "Some visitors have been coming back here for years," Charlie says. "There have been several European couples that have rented and last year there was a group from Britain."

Opening pages The main house, nestled among palm trees: its concrete block exterior helps to protect it from hurricane damage

Facing page The east-facing house is almost 50 feet above sea level

Above The terrace is a perfect place to take it easy and enjoy the superb view

Left top Bedroom with patio doors – the terrace wraps around this room, allowing access from each side

Left bottom The main living space is enormous and leads onto both the porch and the terrace

Clockwise from above
The beach hut is set among trees; view of the bay and beach from the beach hut; main bay and beach, with jetty – all ships visiting the island dock here; the master bedroom is one of four bedrooms in the property

If, by some remote chance, a visitor gets bored of relaxing and exploring on Channel Cay, there are plenty of other activities in the Bahamas, such as swimming, boating, taking day trips to other deserted islands and water sports of all descriptions.

The third largest barrier reef in the world surrounds the nearby island of Abaco, creating a superb spot for diving and snorkelling, offering outstanding visibility.

These waters are also a fisherman's paradise, home to many of the big 'sports' fish such as marlin, sailfin, snapper and tuna.

The islands of the Bahamas have restaurants to satisfy all palettes. Most menus have an emphasis on seafood. Favourite local dishes include conch (large marine snails), lobster, boiled fish, chicken souse and the classic West Indian combination of rice 'n' peas. Refreshing coconut and guava dishes complete the feast.

The Bahamas is as close to paradise as it gets, but living there is no longer the sole preserve of the rich and famous. Although it will cost around two to four million US dollars to buy your own desert island home, you can still find three-bedroom townhouses for as little as $150,000 (£85, 163)on Abaco.

However, despite all that the region has to offer, Charlie still isn't ready to make the big jump and live in the Bahamas full-time. "I'm not quite ready to completely kick back," he says. "If I were there full-time I would miss the opera and the orchestras."

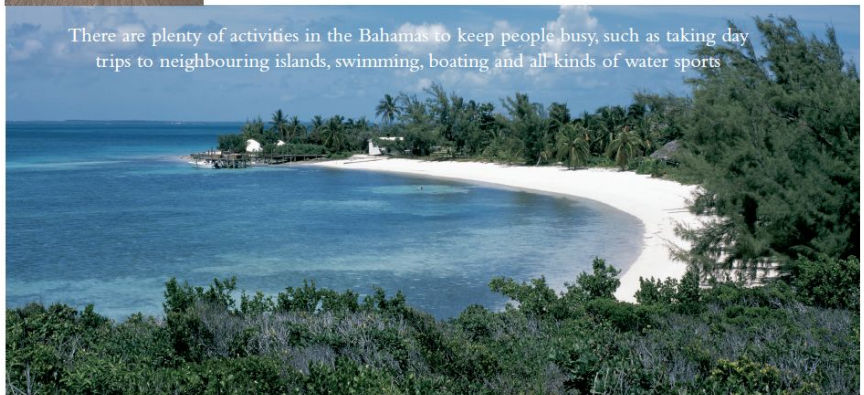
Charlie maintains strong links to the San Francisco Bay Area. He met his wife Marcia there in 1971 after he graduated from university. They have one daughter, who now works for a theatre group in the city, and Charlie is still involved with universities and hi-tech businesses in California.

Over the past few decades Charlie has seen his home city go through many changes. He sums it up by saying: "We've gone through everything in San Francisco – from the flower children to the dot-com boom."

Ultimately, Charlie says the most important thing in life is "self-actualisation". He explains that this is at the top of Dr Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of human needs. Maslow – an esteemed psychologist – wrote: "A musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write, if he is to be at peace with himself. What a man can be, he must be." It's a way of looking at things that Charlie has tried to embrace.

"Self-actualisation means you are finding what is important to you and following it," adds Charlie. After setting up a major electronics business and buying his very own fantasy island, it seems that Charlie Trimble has been able to achieve what he wanted to in his life. His advice for others who are trying to live out their dreams is to simple: "Enjoy the journey."

If you want to find out more about the island, including rental information, go to www.channelcay.com.



There are plenty of activities in the Bahamas to keep people busy, such as taking day trips to neighbouring islands, swimming, boating and all kinds of water sports

10 best Film location homes

EVER SEEN A FILM AND THOUGHT: 'I'D LIKE TO LIVE THERE'? HERE ARE TEN PROPERTIES THAT WILL PUT YOU IN THE PICTURE

WORDS **DAN SAVERY**

1 THE HILLS ARE ALIVE

Film: *The Sound of Music* (1965)

Location: Salzburg, Austria

Stars: Julie Andrews and Christopher Plummer.

Classic moment: Maria Von Trapp (Julie Andrews) sings the title song with the glorious mountains of Salzburg providing the backdrop.

Other films shot here: *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* and *The Third Man*.

FOR £70,730 YOU CAN GET A...

SUPERB SKI CHALET

An attractive, one-bedroom, one-bathroom apartment in Flachau, Salzburgerland, with cross-country ski trails outside the front door.
Contact: Aquavista Property Consultants: 01580 850170; www.aquavistaproperty.com.

2 SHAKEN, NOT STIRRED

Film: *The Man with the Golden Gun* (1974)

Location: Phuket, Thailand

Stars: Roger Moore as James Bond and Christopher Lee as Mr Scaramanga.

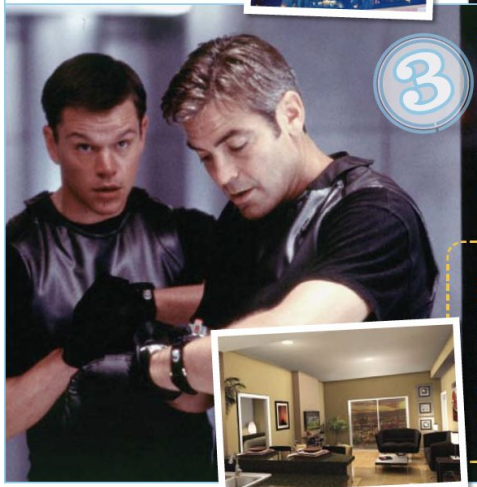
Classic moment: Bond finally meets Mr Scaramanga (the man with three nipples) at his island hideout, Khow-Ping-Kan, which is one of a chain of limestone pillars in Phang Nga Bay at Phuket, on the tip of the Malay peninsula. At the time of filming, this was a remote and undiscovered paradise, now it's overrun by tourists taking boat trips, wanting to see 'James Bond Island'.

Other films shot here: *The Beach*, *Year of the Dragon* and *Good Morning, Vietnam*.

FOR £236,000 YOU CAN GET A...

BEACHFRONT PARADISE

Luxurious one and two-storey townhouses in Phuket, built in a traditional Thai style within the Sirinthara development.
Contact: Ocean Estates: 0034 952 811 750; www.oceanestates.com.



3 VIVA LAS VEGAS

Film: *Ocean's Eleven* (2001)

Location: Las Vegas, USA

Stars: George Clooney, Brad Pitt, Matt Damon and Julia Roberts.

Classic moment: Daniel Ocean (Clooney) foils the elaborate casino security on the night of a big boxing match, featuring bone fide fighter Lennox Lewis.

Other films shot here: *Leaving Las Vegas*, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, *Casino* and the 1951 film *A Place in the Sun*, starring Elizabeth Taylor!

FOR £580,000 YOU CAN GET A...

STYLISH CONDO

A magnificent one-bedroom apartment in a new 41-storey high-rise condominium tower overlooking the world-famous Las Vegas Strip.
Contact: Seven Seas International: 001 714 637 1959; www.sevenseasinternational.

4 AHA ME HEARTIES!

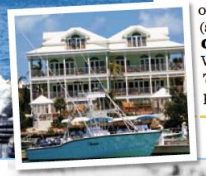
Film: *Pirates of the Caribbean: Curse of the Black Pearl* (2003)

Location: Great Exhuma, The Bahamas

Stars: Johnny Depp, Keira Knightley and Orlando Bloom.

Classic moment: Hearing Johnny Depp's outrageous Keith Richards-esque pirate accent for the first time.

Other films shot here: *Casino Royale*, *Thunderball* and The Beatles' 1965 movie *Help!* Of course, the sequels in the *Pirates of the Caribbean* trilogy – *Dead Man's Chest* and *At World's End* (to be released this summer) – were also shot in The Exhumas, as well as Mexico and Dominica. The films are the highest grossing of the past few years – not bad for a film based on a Disneyland ride!



FOR $425,000 (£215,870) YOU CAN GET A...

CARIBBEAN TREASURE

A stunning luxury villa at the February Point resort in the Exhumas, which features all kinds of water-sport facilities, tennis courts and an infinity pool. The price given relates to an eighth share in a fractional ownership scheme (six weeks a year).
Contact: Black Pearl Ventures: 020 8743 7797; www.blackpearlventures.com.

5 SPAGHETTI JUNCTION

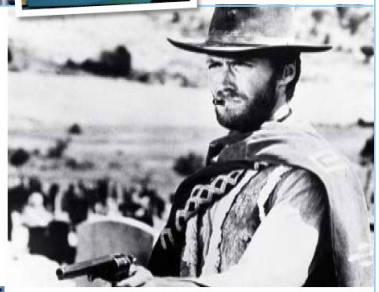
Film: *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly* (1966)

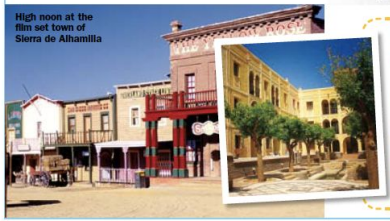
Location: Almeria, Spain

Stars: Clint Eastwood, Eli Wallach and Lee Van Cleef.

Classic moment: The climatic three-way showdown in the graveyard, accompanied by Ennio Morricone's famous music score, which the great composer wanted to resemble "coyotes howling in the desert". Truly unforgettable.

Other films shot here: *Indiana Jones and The Last Crusade*, *Dr Zhivago*, *Lawrence of Arabia* and just about every other spaghetti western. Director Sergio Leone also shot *A Fistful of Dollars* and *For A Few Dollars More* in Spain. Thanks to these films, groups of tourists still flock to Almeria, which became a mini-Hollywood in the 1960s and 1970s.





High noon at the film set town of Sierra de Alhamilla

FOR €205,000 (£137,825) YOU CAN GET A...

DREAM DESERT ABODES

Fantastic one to three-bed townhouses at Desert Springs, the luxury family resort and championship desert golf course near Cuevas del Almanzora. The colonial-style apartments come with communal pools.
Contact: Almanzora Group: 01242 680116; www.almanzora.com.

6 IT'S A KIND OF MAGIC...

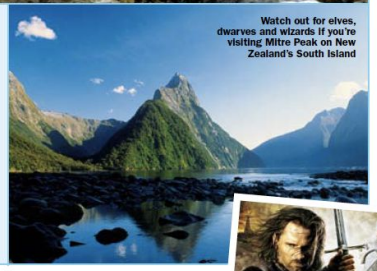
Film: *Lord of the Rings: Fellowship of the Ring* (2001)

Location: Christchurch, New Zealand. Director Peter Jackson decided to shoot the entire *Lord of the Rings* trilogy in New Zealand, his home country. Places of note include the Arrowtown Recreational Reserve, between Queenstown and Christchurch, which was used as the setting for the Misty Mountains, and Matamata in the North Island, which was used as The Shire.

Stars: Elijah Wood, Ian McKellan, Liv Tyler and thousands of computer-generated Orcs.

Classic moment: The first time we see the creepy Black Riders.

Other films shot here: *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *King Kong*. However, the dramatic landscape of New Zealand made the perfect setting for JRR Tolkien's Middle Earth.



Watch out for elves, dwarves and wizards if you're visiting Mitre Peak on New Zealand's South Island

FOR $690,000 (£240,430) YOU CAN GET A...

MISTY MOUNTAIN HOME

Beautiful large four-bedroom family home in Christchurch on New Zealand's South Island, with all mod cons, a covered veranda, spa pool and four acres of gardens.
Contact: Bayleys: 0064 3 313 0219; www.bayleys.co.nz.

7 VIVE LA FRANCE!

Film: *A Good Year* (2006)

Location: Provence, France

Stars: Russell Crowe and Albert Finney. The film was directed by Ridley Scott, who owns a holiday home in Provence. Scott (who also directed *Alien* and *Blade Runner*), came up with the film's title over a bottle of wine. "I was looking for an excuse to come back to France to shoot a film, and this story offered the perfect opportunity," he said.

Classic moment: Max Skinner (Crowe) realises he has been taking life a bit too seriously during a flashback featuring his deceased uncle (Finney).

Other films shot here: *Ronin*, *Moonraker* and *Jules et Jim*.

FOR €619,405 (£407,790) YOU CAN GET A...

RURAL RETREAT

A beautiful three-bed villa overlooking the valley close to Gap, with wonderful landscaped gardens that include a small vineyard, fruit trees and covered terraces. There is also the added bonus of a studio apartment attached to the property for when guests come to stay.
Contact: VEF: 020 7515 8660; www.vefuk.com.

Lavender fields in Banon village, Provence – and not a film crew in sight

8 GET ON THE WEB

Film: *Spider-Man* (2002)

Location: Brooklyn, New York

Stars: Tobey Maguire, Kirsten Dunst and Willem Dafoe.

Classic moment: After rescuing her from the Green Goblin, Spider-Man kisses Mary Jane (Dunst) while still hanging upside down. The original edit of the film featured The World Trade Center, but it was cut after 9/11.

Other films shot here: *Ghost Busters*, *Taxi Driver* – and just about any Woody Allen film! New York also provides the backdrop for the new-look *Spider-Man 3*, which comes out later this year.

FOR $1.1 million (£559,365) YOU CAN GET A...

STYLISH CITY PAD

A spacious, three/four-bedroom brick home in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn. This outstanding house has been recently refurbished.
Contact: Foxtons: 0800 138 6060; www.foxtons.com.

WHEN IN ROME...

Film: *Gladiator* (2000)

Location: Marrakech, Morocco (although some scenes were shot in Malta)

Stars: Russell Crowe, Joaquin Phoenix, Richard Harris, and the last-ever performance from Oliver Reed.

Classic moment: Before the opening battle, Maximus (played by Crowe) inspires his troops by saying: "What we do in life echoes in eternity".

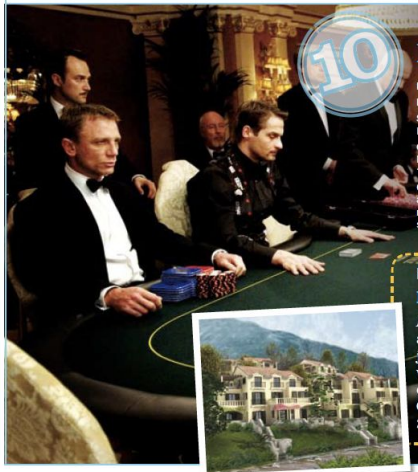
Other films shot here: *Lawrence of Arabia* and *The Last Temptation of Christ*.

Marrakech at dusk – once a film location and now a property hotspot

FOR £284,000 YOU CAN GET A...

MOROCCAN MASTERPIECE

A three-bedroom, three-bath villa at the Samanah Country Club resort, just ten minutes from the centre of Marrakech. **Contact:** Saffron Villas: 01635 253121; www.saffronvillas.com.



IT'S A WINNER

Film: *Casino Royale* (2006)

Location: Kotor Bay, Montenegro

Stars: Daniel Craig, Eva Green and a cameo from Richard Branson.

Classic moment: When asked if he prefers his Martini shaken or stirred, the new Bond replies: "Do I look like I give a damn?".

Other films shot here: Err... not much before Bond and company rolled into town. However, with such a majestic backdrop, there are sure to be more films shot here in the future.

FOR £70,000 YOU CAN GET A...

MOUNTAIN HOME

A fabulous one or two-bed apartment at the new Boka Heights development, just five kilometres west of the beautiful walled Venetian town of Kotor, with communal pool and gardens. **Contact:** Someplace Else: 020 7731 2200; www.someplaceelse.co.uk.

Celeb watch

JASMINE HARMAN

HOME FROM HOME

JASMINE HARMAN, PRESENTER OF CHANNEL 4'S HIT TV SHOW *HOME OR AWAY*, TAKES A BREAK FROM JETTING AROUND THE GLOBE TO TELL US ABOUT HER OWN DILEMMA – HAVING TO CHOOSE BETWEEN PORTUGAL AND THE UK...

WORDS **DAN SAVERY** PICTURES **GETTY**

The phone rings. After a few moments, a familiar voice answers. "Hi, I'm just in the bank," says Jasmine. I offer to call back later but she insists she is able to speak. There is no doubt that this is a hectic time for Jasmine Harman. The latest series of *A Place in the Sun Home or Away* is being aired on primetime Channel 4 on Friday nights, she starts filming the fourth series in April, she's launching her new Body Spa Therapy range of toiletries and has just picked up the keys to her new house in sunny Sutton. Hang on a minute. Sutton, Surrey? Why not Spain, Italy or France?

"Several reasons, really," answers Jasmine, as she settles into a chair. "I have been struggling with my own 'Home or Away' dilemma for a while now. It's weird because I give advice to other people, but when it comes to my own life it's not so easy." She explains that she chose to buy a second home in Sutton because it's a good investment, in a leafy area close to London and since putting in her offer in December, the value of the house has already risen. Her co-presenter Jonnie Irwin would be pleased.

But it doesn't end there. Jasmine still wants to buy a property abroad one day. "I'm always looking for homes based on my house-hunters' specifications," she says, "and there have been occasions when I've seen a property and fallen in love with it." A couple of years ago, she made an offer on a place in the Dordogne, France. In the end, it fell through and it's Portugal that's now top of Jasmine's list.

She spent more than three years living in the Algarve, working as a marketing manager for a resort. "I had a great lifestyle when I lived there," she says. Impressively she learnt to speak Portuguese. "People will hate me for saying this, but I found it easy," she pauses. "I think it's because I'd previously been learning Greek, so Portuguese was a walk in the park in comparison. At least it has the same alphabet as English!"

Jasmine has very fond memories of Portugal, but when I ask which particular areas she is interested in buying, she jokingly says: "You want me to give away all my trade secrets, don't you!"

I've been rumbled. "Well," she says tentatively, "I would like to buy in the Alentejo." This is the vast rural province north of the Algarve known as the "bread basket" of Portugal. "The Alentejo is very quiet and peaceful. I saw a house there

Jet-setting Jasmine is certainly well-travelled, and now she wants to buy her own property overseas

HOMES IN PORTUGAL

WE SORT IT FOR JASMINE

She normally helps others with their search for a dream home, but we've decided to help Jasmine Harman to find her perfect property in Portugal. Here are five places we think might tempt her to take the plunge...

Alentejo

Price: €295,000 (£201,560)
This three-bed, two-bath white cottage is a typical Alentejano 'Monte' (traditional rural home) set in sunflower fields, near Monsaraz.
Contact: Quadrant Overseas: 01276 507513; www.quadrant-property.com.

Silver Coast

Price: €465,000 (£317,455)
Charming part-furnished two-bedroom villa offering superb views and access to a private beach, set on 125 acres of land.
Contact: Quadrant Overseas: 01276 507513; www.quadrant-property.com.

Alentejo

Price: €380,000 (£259,640)
Beautiful country home with guest house and 33,000 square metres of land, near the village of Almograve in the district of Odemira.
Contact: Erik Smit: 00351 269 449 008; www.sale-portugalcasa.com.

Vale da Telha

Price: £230,000
Attractive four-bed, two-bath detached villa in Vale de Telha, on the Costa Azul (Alentejo Coast), with pool and breathtaking views.
Contact: Quadrant Overseas: 01276 507513; www.quadrant-property.com.

Alentejo

Price: €385,000 (£262,975)
Spacious three-bedroom villa, with swimming pool in the Southern Alentejo, close to Ourique, 55 minutes from Faro.
Contact: Alentejo Home: 00351 269 441 717; www.alentejohome.com.

Celeb watch

JASMINE HARMAN

in the last series that I wanted to buy, but the house-hunters bought it! I told them 'If you don't have this, I'm buying it.'"

For investment purposes, she also mentions the Silver Coast and the area in and around Lagos in the Western Algarve as areas with great potential.

Ideally, Jasmine wants to find a traditional Portuguese country house or cottage where she can "get away from it all". It doesn't necessarily need a swimming pool, but it must have at least two bedrooms. This property would be used primarily as a holiday home, but she also wants it to generate some rental income. "I'd like to use it two or three times a year for myself," says Jasmine, "maybe more, if they ever give me any time off from *Home or Away*!"

Now Jasmine has snapped up a property in Sutton, Portugal is next on her shopping list

Last year, Jasmine was away for around eight months filming *Home or Away*, in a different location every week. But, as she explains, the planning process starts much earlier: "Before filming, somebody works out the route so we can easily get from one location to the next. Then there are researchers who look for people with a genuine dilemma of buying at home or away and who search for the best properties for us to film."

In the last series, Jasmine visited the countries she describes as the "usual suspects" – Spain, France, Portugal and Italy, but also more obscure destinations such as Bratislava, Krakow and Lake Bled in Slovenia. Cyprus was particularly emotional for her, as she was reunited with relatives from her mum's side of the family. "It was the first time I had been back since I was ten years old, so it was amazing to see all my cousins and their children. I was a bridesmaid at my cousin's wedding over 20 years ago and when I first saw her again I burst into tears."

Over the past three series of *Home or Away*, Jasmine has met many house-hunters and she says a lot of their problems stem from not knowing the language and having unrealistic expectations. "People always change their minds when looking for a home."

But what makes a place a home? "It's hard to describe," says Jasmine. "I think you get a feeling. Straight away you know if it's the right place. When I found this house in Sutton, I immediately liked it. I could see myself living there. I went into the hallway and the place was a mess, there was cat hair on the carpet, washing up in the sink and toys everywhere, but I could see past that. It's like I connected with it straight away."

Jasmine certainly knows her stuff when it comes to property, after our interview she even starts giving me some tips on dealing with solicitors. I thank her for the advice, congratulate her on her new home and wish her luck with finding her perfect Portuguese property. But something tells me she won't need it.

FOR MORE PROPERTIES IN PORTUGAL TURN TO PAGE 169

ESSENTIALS

ALENTEJO VS SUTTON

Alentejo, Portugal

The Alentejo is one of the largest of the Portuguese provinces. Comprising lower, higher, coastal and central Alentejo, it's effectively one-third of the whole country. The open, rolling countryside is a landscape of olive groves, vineyards and field-after-field of wild flowers.

The region offers much cheaper property than the Algarve – four-bed cottages, with acres of land can be found for under £180,000. But as it's away from the coast, it can get very hot – in recent years, there have been a number of forest fires. The Algarve is slightly more expensive, but the temperature is cooler thanks to the Atlantic breeze.

For more information on property in Portugal, call Quadrant on 01276 507513 or visit www.quadrant-property.com.

Sutton, Surrey

It seems the SM1 postcode is becoming a hot location to buy in for several reasons. Sutton is set in a leafy part of Surrey, and the journey to London Victoria by rail takes just 25 minutes, so it is a prime location for commuters. Properties here offer great rental potential. New one-bed flats can be found for around £150,000 and three-bedroom semi-detached houses cost about £250,000.

For more details on property in Sutton, call Knight Frank on 020 7173 4999 or visit www.knightfrank.co.uk.

"The Alentejo is effectively one third of the whole of Portugal"

Behind the scenes

WE CATCH UP WITH THE TV TEAM BEHIND *A PLACE IN THE SUN HOME OR AWAY* IN THE UK AND PORTUGAL, TO FIND OUT ABOUT LIFE ON LOCATION AND HOW EACH EPISODE IS PUT TOGETHER...

WORDS **DAN SAVERY** PICTURES **LEWIS HOUGHTON**

The success of *A Place in the Sun Home or Away* lies in the simplicity of its premise. It's the property programme that's designed to help house-hunters who are torn between buying a home in the UK and one abroad by showing them a selection of on-budget properties in both locations.

It's proved tp be a winning formula. The show is now in its fourth series, with the latest one about to hit our TV screens, so we decided to go behind the scenes to find out what life is really like on the other side of the camera – and how each episode is put together from start to finish.

So what do you need to know before we get started? The producers of the show make 35 episodes a year and it's a more or less continuous production process for nine months, with filming starting in April and finishing at the end of November. The programme comes from different locations every week, and there are two production teams at work at any one time – one on location for the UK (home) leg and the other on location overseas (away).

To guide the house-hunters and help them to reach a decision, there is a presenter for each location, with Jonnie Irwin joining the house-hunters in the UK and Jasmine Harman taking care of them abroad.

As you would expect, months of research go into each show and the process starts with finding the stars of the show: people just like you.

The house-hunters on the show can come from a variety of sources. Some have responded to adverts on Internet sites such as expat forums, property blogs or the Channel 4 website. Others have contacted the production team after watching the show, and some audition to be on the show at our *A Place in the Sun Live* exhibition.

The house-hunters for this particular episode, Trina and Pete, wrote to the makers of the programme after seeing an episode shot in the States. Currently living in Bradenton, near Sarasota on the Gulf Coast of Florida, they are now looking for a change of scene. "Life in Florida is great in many ways, but there is a lack of culture," explains Pete, "We want a complete change, and we're relying on the crew to find us a new place to live!"

Pete and Trina have been married for 18 years and own a shop that specialises in loud Hawaiian shirts. Through his time serving in the US military, Pete has already spent time living in both Panama and Saudi Arabia, but the couple are now looking for a more peaceful life on either the Silver Coast of Portugal or in Biggleswade in Bedfordshire. Trina grew up in Bedfordshire and the couple met when Pete was based in the UK. The question is: can the TV team help them to find their new home?

THE BRIEF
TRINA AND PETE

Who Trina and Pete Simmons.

Budget £250,000 for a property in the UK or £200,000 for a home in Portugal.

Where The Simmons have asked for the team's help in deciding between a place by the beach on Portugal's booming Silver Coast or a place in Trina's home town of Biggleswade in Bedfordshire. Step in, Jonnie and Jasmine!

Meet the presenters

Jonnie Irwin is *A Place in the Sun Home or Away*'s UK property expert. He worked as a surveyor and property agent in the Midlands before landing a job presenting the show. "Each programme brings out the house-hunters' stories and what their needs are," he says.

Jasmine Harman lived in Portugal for three-and-a-half years before returning to the UK and falling on her feet as a TV presenter. "My time in Portugal really opened my eyes to living outside the UK," she says. She loves her job, saying: "People think they know what they want, until they see all the choices open to them."

TURN OVER TO SEE WHAT HAPPENED TO THE CREW IN THE UK

Mallorca is a vibrant, multi-coloured island. Looking down from the plane as it approaches the airport, one is struck by the red earth, blue seas, silver mountains and green palm trees that have made it one of Europe's best-loved destinations.

Mallorca, the biggest of the Balearics, also has something of a split personality. On the one hand, 'Majorca' (as it is sometimes called), has an image of being a package holiday destination; on the other hand, it's a sophisticated island that can boast one of the truly great European cities, Palma, as its capital.

Palma is like a mini-Barcelona. Its cathedral, situated on the waterside, dates back to 1229 and is one of Europe's tallest gothic structures. The city reclines in the shade of giant palm trees, and with its chic shops, cafes and museums, Palma couldn't be more different to resorts like Magaluf – which is normally associated with nightclubs, tacky Irish-themed bars and drunken stag parties chanting "In-ger-land". But now even Magaluf has demolished many of its old high-rise blocks and has set about changing its image.

Mass tourism in the 1960s and 1970s may have brought more roads, hotels and properties, but at the same time huge parts of the island were unscathed. Mallorca is an example of how a place can not only survive but benefit from tourism.

The island's population has doubled since 1960 and it is estimated that there are around 60,000 Brits and 80,000 Germans on Mallorca at any one time. Many of these are holiday homeowners, but there are also a growing number of people looking to stay permanently. To cope with such high demand there are now literally hundreds of estate agents on the island – but knowing

THE BRIEF

Lori Elmer, 56, is no ordinary house-hunter. She knows a good deal about property as she makes her living selling new apartments in London. Lori (Lorraine), currently lives in a 16th-century cottage in Essex, but as she is approaching retirement age she wants to buy a second home on the island of Mallorca. Accompanying her on this trip is her son Ben.

Ben, 28, is a marine upholsterer and there would be no shortage of work for him out here as boating is one of the island's main pastimes.

The Elmers know Mallorca like an old friend. They had several holidays on the island when Ben and his sister Abi were children, but this is their first trip here in 16 years. "I've got some good memories of Mallorca," says Ben.

"I've always felt at home here," adds Lori. "We used to stay with friends at a farmhouse and we got to know and love the island." Lori remembers driving around the Mallorcan countryside in an old Fiat, and buying fresh fruit and vegetables from the local shops. "We experienced the island in quite a very different way than if we'd come on a package holiday," she says.

Abi now has two children of her own and Lori wants her grandchildren to enjoy Mallorca like her own kids did years ago. Therefore she is looking for a property with at least two bedrooms and enough space for her family and friends to come out and stay. "To start with I want it to be a holiday home, but over time I would like to live out here," she says.

Mallorca has a well established property market and is one of the most expensive places to buy in Spain. Lori's budget of £200,000 is not going to get her a luxury villa with a pool, but it could get her a large apartment or a smaller country house. She is willing to look in various areas of the island, on the coast and inland, to see what she can get for her money.

Believe in Belize

THIS TINY NATION ON SOUTH AMERICA'S CARIBBEAN COAST IS BIG ON ECO-TOURISM, AND ITS FLEDGLING PROPERTY MARKET IS GRABBING A LOT OF ATTENTION. WHERE BELIZE IS CONCERNED, SMALL MOST DEFINITELY IS BEAUTIFUL...

WORDS **DAN SAVERY** PICTURES **GETTY, TIPS**

Until recently, the term 'eco-tourism' was often bandied about without, perhaps, being fully understood. But with growing talk of climate change and environmental crisis, eco-tourism is now being taken very seriously – and developments in Belize are leading the way.

Located on the Caribbean coast below Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula, Belize (formerly known as British Honduras) also borders Guatemala in the west and south. This tiny nation in Central America, covering 8,866 square miles, (of which 40 per cent is national park), is about the same size as Wales. But as one of the early environmentalists, Fritz Schumacher, said in his ground-breaking book of the same name: "small is beautiful".

In the case of Belize, this is certainly true. It has so much crammed into such a limited area, including 300 miles of beaches, around 400 islands off its coast, the Maya Mountains, waterfalls and acres of lush tropical jungle.

But without doubt, the country's greatest natural asset is its range of diving sites. Belize's reef is second only in size to Australia's Great Barrier Reef. Development of the diving industry has been lower-key here than in other Caribbean destinations, so the coral is unspoilt and home to a huge array of rare species. It also offers excellent opportunities for fishing and other watersports, including lesser-known

Belize

ONE TO WATCH

Above: It's the high life for tourists, who can enjoy holiday accommodation on the beach along Belize's fantastic palm-lined coast

Left: Butterfly Falls is hidden away in the country's lush jungle

Right: an advertising mural on the wall of a Belizean cafe

called Ambergris Caye, an island off the north coast. But Mason says some of the development at Ambergris has been "very messy", mixing old shabby wooden buildings with newer resorts.

Once part of the British Empire, Belize gained independence in 1981. After this, it became the ultimate backwater, an English-speaking, largely black-Creole outpost in Central America. Think New Orleans meets Jamaica, via Mexico (if you can imagine such a thing). "Culturally, they're a real mix," says James Kellow. "Most people are English-speaking, but there are Caribbean and Latin-American influences."

Belize's population numbers a little over 200,000 and this nation is a true democracy, operating under the parliamentary system it adopted from Britain. Unlike other Central American countries, such as Guatemala, there is absolute freedom of the press.

Belizeans are widely considered to be some of the most laid-back people on earth. Hotel check-out time is generally "whenever you want". The cuisine is quite basic, largely made-up of chicken, beans, rice and lots of seafood. The country's main industry is primarily tourism, although this could eventually be eclipsed by the property market.

House prices across the country completely vary, as a lot depends on access to the beaches. According to SomeplaceElse.co.uk, average prices for decent developments are in the region of $350,000 (£177,000). However, for a two-bed property, it's about US$200,000 (£101,900).

Inland, it is still possible to find old detached houses for under $100,000 (£50,830). But you won't find these on Google. The majority of old resale property is not advertised. The only way to find out what's really available is to travel to Belize and spend some

“It seems the secret is out. Like Cape Verde a couple of years ago, Belize could be the surprise property hotspot of this year”

activities such as cave tubing (where you hurtle down a river in a rubber ring through a network of caves).

However, it seems the secret is out. Like Cape Verde a couple of years ago, Belize could be the surprise property hotspot of this year. According to emerging market specialist Someplace Else.co.uk, tourism is rising by more than 20 per cent annually.

At present, visitors from the US represent 61 per cent of the market share, but there are growing numbers of European tourists and this looks set to continue as Belize's international airport is expanding and direct flights from Europe are expected by the end of 2007. For now, visitors to Belize have to connect via US cities such as Atlanta, New York, Dallas and Miami, or fly into Cancun in Mexico and take a 12-hour bus ride down the Caribbean coast.

Buses are generally a good way to get around this part of the world. They run on time and it is still possible to spot some of the old 'chicken buses' that carry backpackers and locals to remote parts of Guatemala. In terms of infrastructure, Belize is still developing, but that is part of its charm.

Indeed, Aldous Huxley, when travelling in Central America in 1934 wrote: "If the world had any ends, Belize would be one of them. It is not on the way from anywhere to anywhere else. It is all but uninhabited." Back then, Huxley must have felt like one of the first Europeans when they landed in the Americas. But even today, it still feels like an undiscovered paradise.

"Belize is one of the most exciting emerging markets in the world," says James Kellow of Belize Grove. "I always compare it to somewhere like Antigua in the Caribbean about 15-20 years ago. It's completely off the beaten track. The infrastructure is improving. It has great telecommunications, but some of the roads can be a bit ropey."

BUYING PROCESS

The lowdown on buying in Belize

£ The only rules and restrictions are that foreign purchase on any island has to have government approval via the Ministry of Natural Resources, and sales in certain protected coastal areas have to be oked by the local village council.

£ The great news for investors is that Belize has no capital gains or inheritance taxes for non-Belizeans. Lawyers' fees are about two per cent of the purchase price; this should cover title searches and the drawing up of contracts. In total, you should factor in an extra 12-15 per cent on top of the purchase price for fees.

The bad news is that it is quite difficult for non-residents to get mortgages from banks in Belize. However, new developments are springing up with mortgages attached by the developer. Terms vary, but generally the purchaser makes a ten per cent down payment, with the rest being paid back over ten years.

A Place in the Sun's Belize Guide

ESSENTIAL GUIDE: everything you always wanted to know about Belize in a handy nutshell-type parcel

£ CURRENCY
The Belize dollar (BZ$). There are around 3.84 to the pound.

✈ GETTING THERE
At present, there are no direct flights to Belize from Europe. However, its airport is expanding and direct flights from Europe are expected to be running by the end of 2007. For now, most visitors enter Belize via the US cities of Atlanta, Dallas, Miami, Houston, Charlotte or New York. You can choose between Delta, American Airlines, Continental, or United Airlines. You can also fly into Cancun in Mexico and take a bus down the Caribbean coast. Belize's internal airlines – Tropic Air and Maya Air – link its most popular areas. However, most places can be easily reached by bus.

● CLIMATE
Belize has a sub-tropical climate, with long hot summers and mild winters. The Caribbean Sea provides a welcome breeze. The annual temperature averages 27°C (80°F). July to October is the rainy season, but these are usually just short downpours interrupting the year-round sun.

KEY AREAS
The first foreign buyers tended to head for the islands off the Caribbean coast. Ambergris Caye is the most developed. Here you can find a mixture of old wooden huts and condo resorts, largely catering for American tourists. However, today's investors are looking further south. The Placencia Peninsula has several new beach developments and average prices for luxury two-bed condos are about US$350,000 (£177,000). But it's much cheaper inland. In the Cayo District – mostly wild jungle near the northern forests of Guatemala – it is possible to find a detached rural home for under US$100,000 (£50,830).

“The first foreign buyers in Belize tended to head for the islands off the Caribbean coast. However, today's investors are looking further south”

Ben Mason of SomeplaceElse.co.uk says Belize has very strict rules on conservation. "You usually can't build higher than three storeys," he says. "When you arrive at the airport there are huge adverts for the BFREE." (Belize Foundation for Research and Environmental Education).

SomeplaceElse is marketing two new resorts in Belize. The first, called Belize Reserve, is inland, very near the border with Guatemala. It claims to be 100 per cent self-sufficient. "All hot water and energy come from solar power," explains Mason. "The sewers and waste water use an anaerobic bacteria system, which requires no electricity and no maintenance. Water comes from natural springs on site, plus there is a river and water purification system. Everything comes from renewable energy resources."

Belize Reserve sounds like the ultimate eco-friendly resort and could be pointing the way for future schemes around the world. The development borders the Tapir Mountain Nature Reserve and is located near the ruins of some ancient Mayan pyramids. The Mayans inhabited this region for thousands of years, but the reasons for their disappearance, around 900AD, remain a mystery. Hidden deep in the jungle, the structures are magical places to explore. "I've been to the much-admired Machu Picchu in Peru, but some of the ruins in Belize are as good – if not better," says Mason.

SomeplaceElse's other resort is called Bella Maya, which is on the Placencia Peninsula, in the south-east of the country. "Placencia is where it's happening now," says Mason. "Prices have risen a lot in three years and properties range from boutique rustic-style beach cabanas to colonial houses."

Originally, the first foreigners that invested in Belize bought in an area

Opening page: Belize has 300 miles of wonderful beaches – and acres of lush tropical jungle

Opposite: the country's reef has an array of sealife that rivals Australia's Great Barrier Reef

Clockwise from top left: the Placencia Peninsula is one spot currently popular with investors; many think the development on Ambergris Caye is "very messy"; strong Latin-American and Caribbean influences can be seen all over

THE BIG ISSUE

Who's that at the door? Don't worry, just your boss.
Photo: Rex Features

TAKING A SICKIE? EXPECT A VISIT FROM THE GAFFER

BY DAN SAVERY AND JUDY KERR

Twenty-first-century workers already face having their emails, telephone calls and even toilet visits monitored by Big Brother employers. As if that wasn't bad enough, imagine the next time you have a hangover and call in sick with a dodgy excuse, you answer a knock at the door to find your boss standing there.

This is now the frightening reality for Manchester Council's housing staff, thanks to tough new measures introduced by chief Steve Rumbelow in a drive to clamp down on employees who feign illness.

Housing director Rumbelow is behind what is believed to be the first ever example of a local authority implementing the 'sick-bed inspector' method – and only the second case of any British employer utilising it.

Managers in the housing department have been instructed to speak to staff immediately after they call in sick, and if the absentee is unavailable by telephone prepare for the line manager to pay them a personal visit at home. They have also been told to demand doctors' notes for workers who have three short-term absences within three months.

Recent figures showed that the 1,600 workers in the Manchester Council's housing department were absent for more than 14 days on average a year, while the total council workforce of 26,000 is losing 180,000 days to sickness annually at a cost of £10 million.

Defending the decision, Rumbelow said: "I have concerns about the level of sickness absence [and] to deliver continued service improvements we need to have our most important resource, our people, available.

"Sickness has a significant negative impact upon team colleagues who remain in work and are required to cover the duties of others who are absent."

A Manchester Council spokesman claimed that there "wasn't necessarily a problem with absenteeism" and that "most employees" were "reasonably happy" with the initiative.

But the department's senior union representative, Jim Mackrell of UNISON, told The Big Issue that workers' reactions to the plans were the worst he had ever seen in his time at the housing section.

"Some of our senior representatives met the director and the head of resources to put our concerns and they've gone away to think about them," he explained.

"It's in all our interests to reduce sickness, but I was a bit surprised about their lack of communication, normally we'd expect them to discuss something like this with us."

Barry Hugill, spokesman for Liberty, the human rights group, also condemned the idea of conducting spot-checks on ill staff by turning up at their homes.

"No one can stop anyone from knocking on someone's door, but if someone was punished for not answering their door, that would be a different matter," he said.

"There clearly is a problem in the public sector motivating staff, but certainly systems like this show that you have no trust at all in your staff, which will lower morale and create a climate of fear."

Public-sector sickness is twice as high as that in private firms, according to a 2002 study by consultants The Work Foundation. A UK survey by Norwich Union Healthcare last month found that around nine million of the 22 million sick notes requested a year are invalid, while research carried out by Doctor and Personnel Today magazines last year found 80 per cent of doctors do not want the responsibility of writing sick notes, and the majority only do because of patient pressure.

Manchester Council is following in the steps of Thames Valley Police in Oxfordshire – it pioneered home visits some years ago. "It's not about spying on people, it's about helping people who are having problems getting into work," a spokeswoman asserted.

NEWS IN BRIEF

SOCIETY
BUSK A MOVE

An incredible prize is on offer to the winner of a new competition to find Britain's most talented busker – a hotel room for a whole year in London's West End. Busker Idol has been launched by the first Travelodge hotel in the busking heartland of Covent Garden, which is offering both the room and permission to busk in its grounds to the eventual winner. Applicants can register for the competition at www.travelodge.co.uk, while the public can nominate their favourite street performer at buskeridol@travelodge.co.uk. The finalists will fight it out on May 18 in London.

CHARITY
STEP TO IT

The Big Issue Foundation is looking for participants for its annual 10-mile 'Big Step' sponsored walk through the centre of London on Sunday May 16. Participants are asked to raise a minimum of £50 in sponsorship, which will be used to tackle homelessness. Registration costs £10 and all walkers will receive a Big Issue T-shirt. The route will take in Westminster Abbey, Covent Garden, and St Paul's and Southwark Cathedrals, and will culminate in a pint by the river. Application forms can be obtained by calling 020-7526 3456 or emailing events@bigissue.com

by police and security staff, also seized many other offending musical instruments from the cacophonous property in Oswald Road, Chorlton. These included electronic keyboards, a guitar, trombone, a viola, CD players, a tape player and an amplifier.

FINANCE
STRAPPED FOR CASH?

Do you know of a community group that is desperate to secure funding? If so, a new government website aimed at demystifying the application process could help. The site (www.Governmentfunding.org.uk) aims to cut through bureaucracy and speed up the process of finding the right grant out of the £120 million of total funding available. Organisations will be be able to register online to receive information on new relevant grants, make their application and track its progress through the system.

Eastern Europe following the latest round of EU expansion, industry experts have claimed.

The inclusion of Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Poland, Hungary and Estonia into the EU has raised concerns that cowboy builders will now have easy access to sub-standard building products that fail to meet stringent UK safety regulations.

"If these products [from East European countries] failed, or if the

the entire industry and if standards were to fall then so would people's confidence in the industry."

The warnings, which particularly concern timber, follow EU attempts to slash red tape and roll individual member state regulations into one harmonised set of rules.

Under the CE (European Conformity) system, individual manufacturers now have the power to vet their own products and say

competitors. They fear that, for instance, cheap cement might be sold in their country, and that the consumers would buy these cheaper products."

Tebbit added that it was up to builders and consumers to exercise discretion when sourcing materials. "If you are offered something that's too good to be true, then it probably isn't any good," he warned.

NEWS/ HEALTH

MALE NURSES: ISOLATED, DEPRESSED AND SUICIDAL

BY DAN SAVERY AND JUDY KERR

Male nurses are more likely to develop depression than their female counterparts, pioneering new research has revealed.

The study conducted by Manchester University found that women in the profession not only rate themselves as happier than men, but also receive more help than their male colleagues.

The survey, based on interviews with 73 male and female nurses, concluded that men feel more isolated in their working environments.

Manchester University researcher Roxane Gervais told The Big Issue: "What was interesting was that women were utilising their social support," she said. "Previous research also backs up that men keep things to themselves and don't open up as much as women."

Barry McInnes, head of counselling at the Royal College Of Nursing (RCN), said that the fact that more than 90 per cent of nurses are women could cause problems for some men. "If you're one in ten, there is potential for social isolation," he said.

"Men tend to take longer to seek help. When they do seek help the symptoms can be significantly worse," McInnes added. "It would not surprise me if this discrepancy is repeated in teaching and social work."

He believes NHS employers should be more proactive in raising awareness of the issue and encourage male nurses to seek help at an earlier stage.

Dan Stern, press officer for the Nursing And Midwifery Council, told The Big Issue: "Any nurse who is depressed is a worry."

He said that reasons for depression could be "NHS targets, stress and the fact that it's a very emotionally engaging job".

Alan White, principal lecturer in nursing at Leeds Metropolitan University, conducted a study for the Department of Health in 2001 which found that social isolation levels were higher in men in general. White, who also chairs the Men's Health Forum, which campaigns to improve the provision of male healthcare, said: "Men tend to have 'mates', whereas women have more closer friends who they can call on if they have a problem."

He added: "For nurses, the occupational health department at the hospital should be a point of call, but men tend not to be good users of health services, even if they are male nurses."

Figures compiled from data supplied by the BMA (British Medical Association) and the United Kingdom Central Council For Nursing, Midwifery And Health Visiting showed that nurses are four times more likely to commit suicide compared to employees working outside of medicine.

THE EVENING ARGUS (BRIGHTON)

'War on terror' can be used to justify any military action taken by a Western power

IT seems every time you turn on the TV, someone says the words "weapons of mass destruction", "war on terrorism" or "anti-social behaviour".

There is no doubt these topics need discussion and thought by as many people as possible. However, the constant repetition of these Government "sound bites" is starting to control the way we talk.

Instead of thinking of words for ourselves, "think tanks" from Millbank or Whitehall are being paid to come up with the latest concise buzz-phrase.

It is even affecting the way I am writing this comment. The words have been chosen and, if you try and deviate from these catchphrases, nobody seems to know what you are talking about.

The phrase "anti-social behaviour" is the new buzz-term used to describe anyone from homeless people and beggars to gangs of "yobs". When you stop and question what exactly is meant by "yobbish behaviour", you begin to realise the absurdity of the term. At times, the behaviour of Michael Howard or David Blunkett could be described as "yobbish".

The old favourite "weapons of mass destruction" was wheeled out by MPs for so long that we now say "WMD". When George Bush talks about "WMD" he is usually referring to the arsenal of some "rogue state" and not America, the only country that has ever dropped an atomic bomb in warfare.

"War on terror" can be used to justify any military action taken by a Western government, replacing the 20th Century "cold war".

And just what is a terrorist? Should George Bush be considered a terrorist? The term can be used now to arrest people without them necessarily committing an offence and the term "axis of evil" used to label different groups all over the world as one common enemy.

Anyone who questions suspect events such as JFK's assassination, Princess Diana's death or the events of September 11 is automatically labelled a "conspiracy theorist". Why? Questioning who was really behind the September 11 attacks, for example, is an important issue for analysis.

The anti-war movement is guilty of its own sloganism.

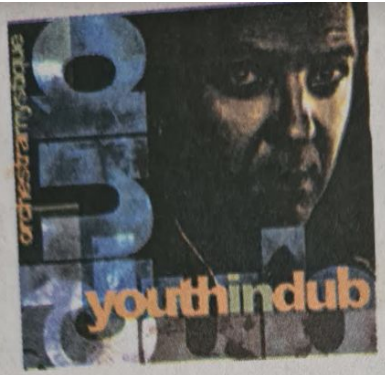
Millions of people marched under the banner of "stop the war" but perhaps this should be changed to a more positive message of "start the peace".

In the run-up to the next general election we will be inundated with more slogans such as "Britain is working". People remember Tony Blair's 1997 pledge of "education, education, education" which turned out to mean "fees, fees, fees".

Many writers compare modern Britain with George Orwell's 1984. If you think this isn't really happening, just listen to yourself and you'll be amazed how many sound bites have entered your own vocabulary. Orwell called it "newspeak" but when it comes to WMD, foundation hospitals and the like, it seems we are all taking part in what Tony Blair called "group think".

Dan Savery,
the thinking person's yob

Is something bothering you? Then get it off your chest by emailing rant@theargus.co.uk
Only contributors who include their full name and address will be considered for publication, although we shall only show an abbreviated form of the address. We reserve the right to shorten letters.



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YOUTH IN DUB
by ORCHESTRA MYSTIQUE
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Producer, remixer, musician, artist, poet etc, Youth, (born Martin Glover Youth), works from his studio/squat in Brixton. *Youth in Dub* is a long overdue album. For years Youth has been the brains behind some magical music, but generously gives the limelight to others. His CV reads like an a-z of innovative styles: ex-bassist from Killing Joke, producer of The Orb's classic *Adventures Beyond the Ultraworld*, and Brit Award winner for The Verve's *Urban Hymns*. However, dub is his home. This CD opens with Indian sitars, and the tempo gradually accelerates until the last track *Peace and Love*. Like Bill Laswell, any Youth album is a collaboration. A booklet of his poems are enclosed. It's almost like he is opening the doors and letting us in! Hopefully Youth will be playing this material live in Brighton, if so, see you there! **Dan Savery**

THE ESSEX CHRONICLE

★ Poor ★★ Average ★★★ Good ★★★★ Excellent

A hard day's Knight

A Knights Tale
cert PG, 132mins
★★

AS THE summer draws to a close, the release of the major studio blockbusters also slows down.

It seems that this year we have been overwhelmed with big-budget American films, and sadly most of them fail to excite. Cinema of late has been awash with unimaginative remakes of old TV shows/comics like *Planet of the Apes*, or needless sequels like *Jurassic Park III*. *A Knight's Tale* is not a serious box office contender with these films, but it does have a certain charm that other recent blockbusters have lacked.

The movie's tone is set from the very first stomp of Queen's "We Will Rock You" accompanying the opening credits. This is not a film that takes itself too seriously. In the middle of the film there is a funky medieval dance sequence to David Bowie's "Golden Years" and our hero William, (Heath Ledger), enters the arena to Thin Lizzy's "The Boys are Back in Town". *A Knight's Tale* seems to have more in common with the old ITV show *Gladiators* than Ridley Scott's epic *The Gladiator*.

Oscar winning writer/director Brian Helgeland, (*LA Confidential*), has made the film with an international feel. Although *A Knight's Tale* is an American movie, it was made in the magnificent Czech countryside and has a mostly British cast, with no big Hollywood stars, which makes a refreshing change.

A Knight's Tale is a conventional rags to riches story about a fictional character called William Thatcher, (who has nothing in common with ex-PM Margeret), and his band of medieval misfits. William is a peasant who tries to "change his stars" and become a Knight. He meets a writer called Jeff Chaucer who talks him into becoming a champion in the English contest of jousting.

The plot moves very fast in this joust-a-minute roller coaster, and inevitably our hero meets a fair maiden called Jocelyn, (Shannon Sossaman). As-per-usual, the hero and the leading lady fall in love without speaking to each other, I guess filmmakers know that audiences like fast-love as much as they love fast food. William, (who begins the film with blonde dreadlocks), also meets his enemy, jousting champion Count Adhemar, (Rufus Sewell). Adhemar is determined to derail William's dreams of love and glory and they do battle in the arena.

The plot, title and setting are all too familiar thanks to films like Richard Gere's *First Knight* but *A Knight's Tale* is more fun than the usual medieval film. The film has much in common with *Robin Hood* and *Braveheart*, but it also has a hint of *Monty Python and The Holy Grail* about it.

There are some very British jokes in the script, which make fun of modern society by using a setting from the past.

The overall message of the film is that a man can "change his stars", with a little help from his friends and by using his heart. However, although the story tries to convey the idea that love and friendship are more important than money and material objects, it fails because of the usual predictable ending.

Despite some nice cheeky ideas with the 70s music, there is no denying that *A Knight's Tale* is a run-of-the-mill family action film set in that olde England that American audiences seem to love. The only positive is that it did not rely on hype or so-called realistic special effects of dinosaurs/monkeys to keep the audience entertained.

Daniel Savery

Cast & Credits

Directed by
Brian Helgeland
Produced by
Tim Van Relim, Todd Balck
Starring
Heath Ledger, Rufus Sewell, Mark Addy, Shannon Sassamon

WAS IT THE ESSENTIAL FESTIVAL?

■ Dan Savery looks back at The Essential Festival which took place on Hackney Marshes during the weekend of 20th July.

EAST LONDON turned into a hip part of town last weekend as the Essential Festival arrived at Hackney Marshes for two days of eclectic music.

Saturday was the dance day and Sunday was roots. The vibe of the festival was set by the Essential Drummers welcoming people at the entrance. Apart from a downpour of rain early on Saturday, the weather was fine despite the threat of grey clouds, and the 15,000 people gathered could enjoy the music.

On Saturday the highlights were Judge Jules, and the way he mixed two house tunes into something very different, DJ Hype's scratching and the unmistakable angry rap voice of Public Enemy's Chuck D. The Garage Nation Arena attracted a few too many Ali G type wide-boys but festivals, in general, tend to attract the usual crowd of hippies, crusties and clubbers.

The Stereo Mcs headlined the main stage on Saturday, with their own brand of raw, funky dance, that the crowd seemed to enjoy. West Coast rap legend Ice-T played both days on the Hip Hop stage and proved that nothing can get the place jumping like classic, foul-mouthed old skool Hip Hop. Roni Size Reprazent also played both days, with female vocalist Onalee surprisingly proclaiming that this was their last ever gig. Maybe the Reprazent band are just physically tired of playing such fast drum n' bass live, or maybe Roni Size wants a new challenge, somehow I don't think we've heard the last from Roni size and his Bristol crew.

Sunday was a more chilled-out day, with a real multi-cultural blend of music from around the world. Disappointingly, funk legend Isaac Hayes, jazz legend Herbie Hancock and the awesome trance of Afro Celt Soundsystem had all pulled out just a week or two before the festival, so there was not much to replace them.

On the main stage George Clinton and the P-Funk All Stars headlined. However, the music was a bit too slow and quiet, (for anyone who wasn't directly in front of a speaker), so I was a bit disappointed, as I was expecting the hard, crazy, psychedelic-funk that Funkadelic is on record. Nevermind, it was the smaller tents where the best music was happening on Sunday, the problem was trying to see them all. People with mobile phones could benefit by calling their friends in other arenas and checking where to go next.

The Jazz Stage had many highlights, but none shone brighter than Gil Scott Heron. His amazing voice, (which sounds like dark chocolate), delivered his poetic lyrics like "Gotta work for peace", over his superbly delicate band. Courtney Pine blew the crowd away, quite literally, with his sax, and the ultra cool French band St.Germain chilled everyone out. The Reggae Stage was quality all day, with Black Uhuru stealing the show. Dreadzone did well by combing dance and reggae. Joi began the Global Spirit Arena with hypnotic Indian vocals and techno synth/guitar. Banco De Gaia rounded the day off with an inspirational set of global trance with a heavy rock guitar. There was also the Xtreme Skate event, which is cool for a while, but there is only so many times you can laugh at someone falling off.

The only shame about festivals, is that they seem to have gone too commercial. For instance, people had to give their food and drink to security on entrance, so you have to pay £3 for a watered down beer. There were huge queues for the toilets, the food was the usual uncooked festival burgers and many of the running orders of the bands had changed, leaving people confused. The organisation of the festival left a lot to be desired. However, nothing could spoil the wonderful music heard by all. Unlike V2001, Reading and the awful Party in the Park, the Essential Festival was about alternative music, not Eminem, Limp Bizkit and Atomic Kitten.

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THE EVENING ECHO (SOUTHEND)

YOU reported the renovation of the public toilets in Leigh.

This is to be applauded and is long overdue as the current facilities are a disgrace.

I have only one reservation, about the reference to a "vandal-resistant" design.

I hope this will be more imaginative than the lacklustre stainless steel types found elsewhere in the town, which are drab and unwelcoming and frankly stand as a challenge to the mindless.

It would be a pity if the majority of users have to endure substandard surroundings because of the possible actions of these morons.

There are other suitable designs and materials available which I have seen used in other towns around the country. Indeed in addition to disabled facilities some have also offered baby changing facilities.

However, the cornerstone to the excellent facilities elsewhere is regular inspection and cleaning which is in itself a deterrent to vandalism and in the long term cost-effective.

One hopes this new initiative is similarly well thought out.

MIKE HANSFORD
Leigh

Waking up to harsh reality

"THIS is reality. This is not a film. I repeat, this is reality." I will never forget those words, spoken by a BBC newsreader on September 11.

His audience were so used to playing computer games and watching Hollywood blockbusters that they had to be told that what they were seeing was real. Reality slapped us in the face. I was in Thailand, wading in the warm sea the day before the attacks, looking at the beaches and thinking" "This is paradise." But maybe I was too happy, maybe quite a few of us had got too happy, and forgotten that there is violence, suffering and injustice in the world that we turn a blind eye to.

We couldn't turn a blind eye to what happened on September 11. It was so baffling being there in paradise as the world went mad on TV. That day showed us that there is still a dark side to this beautiful world, and we still have a lot of work to do.

It also showed us how precious family and friends are, but it also has to wake up the world.

DANIEL SAVERY
Ferry Road,
Hullbridge

Boots not for walking

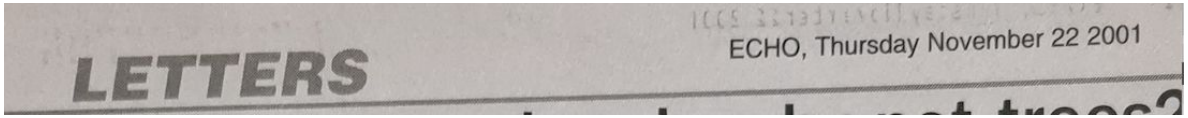
I WOULD like to point out to readers problems experienced at a major garden centres, owned by a supermarket although it appears to have now been sold on.

I bought a pair of Wellington boots on a Monday, cost £10, but took them back on the Wednesday because they were too small.

The store refused to change them for a larger size because I did not keep the receipt. The bar code was intact but I was told it was company policy not to take any return without the till receipt.

This was the last time I will shop at this "green" supermarket garden centre.

PAT PRICE
Vowler Road,
Langdon Hills



LETTERS

ECHO, Thursday November 22 2001

Where it all started… a reader's letter to my local newspaper - The Evening Echo.

WHAT THEY SAID

COVERAGE OF MY ARTICLES

Home

Forget the Strife, Lonely Planet Puts Tel Aviv in Top Three Cities in World

Israel's party capital wins praise for its tolerant attitudes and thrivings arts - 'a kind of San Francisco in the Middle East'.

Zen Read

Irit Rosenblum

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Nov. 2, 2010

The Lonely Planet travel guide series has put Tel Aviv in third place on its list of "top 10 cities for 2011." New York occupies first place, while Tangier, Morocco, is second.

"Tel Aviv is the total flipside of Jerusalem, a modern Sin City on the sea rather than an ancient Holy City on a hill," the entry on Tel Aviv states. "Hedonism is the one religion that unites its

Travel

'Everyone's body is a temple.'
Photo: AFP

'San Francisco of Mideast.'
Photo: Yaron Brener

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Tel Aviv among top 10 cities of 2011

'Truly diverse 21st-century Mediterranean hub,' writes Lonely Planet of Tel Aviv, ranking it third on list of next year's top 10 urban travel destinations

Ynet | Published: 11.02.10 , 08:55

And in the third place – Tel Aviv. The widely distributed tourist guide book Lonely Planet ranked the Israeli hot spot third on its top 10 cities of 2011.

"Our top picks show that a city doesn't need to be a heaving metropolis to get on the list," wrote the editors, adding, "Then again, sometimes it helps."

Gay-Friendly

Tel Aviv nominated for gay tourism awards
Ynet

City to compete in MTV-sponsored race for titles of 'Sexiest City', 'Best Breakout Destination'

While the first place was unsurprisingly nabbed by New York City, the coveted second place went to the North African city of Tangier, Morocco, which editors called "A stylish new Tangier with a dynamic arts community, renovated buildings, great shopping and chic new restaurants."

Israel's unofficial capital came in third, receiving a slew of compliments from the editors: "Tel Aviv is the total flipside of Jerusalem, a modern Sin City on the sea rather than an ancient Holy City on a hill," they wrote.

"Hedonism is the one religion that unites its inhabitants. There are more bars than synagogues, God is a DJ and everyone's body is a temple. Yet, scratch underneath the surface and Tel Aviv, or TLV, reveals itself as a truly diverse 21st-century Mediterranean hub.

A Tale of Three Cities

A visit to the top 3 'Lonely Planet' cities in one week: Azmi Bishara's sister's restaurant in New York, a nightclub in Tangier and 'Sin City on the sea' - aka Tel Aviv

Zen Read

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Gideon Levy
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Nov. 26, 2010

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11:28 Powered by Trinity Audio

It was long after midnight and the place was virtually empty. Layali al-Ouns (Nights of Happiness) is located on the boardwalk stretching along Tangier's beach, amid other nightclubs with their far-from-alluring exteriors. Beefy security men bestride the entrances, cheap neon signs flicker on the roofs. Inside, Ashraf Munir, a Moroccan singer is in the middle of a warm-up performance, warbling hits of Umm Kulthum, the legendary Egyptian diva, and others ("I never saw him and I will never forget him," "My beloved, I was born to love you") accompanied by a big, noisy band, with drums pounding and strings wailing, in an almost empty hall. Nights of happiness, indeed. The next song: "Palestine, return to us."

Shimon Peres likes to quote David Ben-Gurion, who said that you can see if an encyclopedia is worth its salt by checking an entry you know something about. Here's what "Lonely Planet" has to say about Tel Aviv, ranking one place lower than Tangier: "a modern Sin City on the sea ... Hedonism is the one religion that unites its inhabitants. There are more bars than synagogues, God is a DJ and everyone's body is a temple."

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They've got it down to a T, right? So the description of Tangier is also right on.

Negev named as top travel spot by Lonely Planet

Jennifer Lipman
October 26, 2012 13:46

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ISRAEL
'Sin City' Tel Aviv top Lonely Planet pick

The Ramon crater in the Negev desert (Photo: AP)

Travel

Israeli pride. Negev sands
Photo: Asaf Kazado

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Negev among Lonely Planet's top 10 regions

Israeli desert area ranks second on popular guide's best travel destinations list for 2013. Honor shared with Palestinian Authority

Ynet | Published: 10.28.12 , 14:40

The Negev region, which occupies 60% of Israel's land surface area, has been ranked second on the Lonely Planet website's Top 10 Regions for 2013list.

Southern Pearl

Beresheet named one of 60 top hotels
Danny Sadeh

Southern Israeli hotel included in 2012 Hot List selected by prestigious American magazine Condé Nast Traveler

Every year, the popular travel guide releases a list of the most attractive places, cities and destinations for the coming year.

"For decades the Negev was regarded as nothing but a desolate desert," the guide wrote of Israel's southern desert region. "But today, this region is a giant greenhouse of development.

July 15, 2013

BBC TRAVEL WRITER CONSISTENTLY ACCURATE AND IMPARTIAL

by Hadar Sela

The 'Travel' section of the BBC website recently included an article about the Ramon Crater titled "Israel's mysterious 'Grand Canyon'" which was also featured on the BBC News website's Middle East page. The article, written by Dan Savery Raz, includes some lovely photographs and plenty of useful practical information for potential visitors to that very special area of outstanding beauty.

HOT TOPIC

The same author has also written about Jaffa, the Galilee and kibbutz tourism for the BBC website, as well as Israeli micro-breweries, wine and hummus. In each case, he manages to produce engaging, interesting, informative and accurate reports without falling into the trap of politicising his subject matter.

That's a welcome mini-break in itself.

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Arts and Culture

Scotland a place to see in 2014 says Lonely Planet

SCOTLAND'S natural attractions and a glittering line-up of events have led a major travel guide to name it one of the best places in the world to visit in 2014.

By JANE BRADLEY
Thursday, 31st October 2013, 7:39 pm

Not so grim up north: Yorkshire and Scotland named as two of the most desirable holiday destinations in the world

- **Scotland was voted third-best country in Lonely Planet booklet**
- **Yorkshire also highly praised by travel trendsetters**
- **Both were praised for beauty spots, culture and sports**

By SAM WEBB
PUBLISHED: 05:38 GMT, 29 October 2013 | **UPDATED:** 05:43 GMT, 29 October 2013

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Yorkshire and Scotland have been chosen among the top places in the world to visit in 2014 in a 'best-of' booklet by travel guide company Lonely Planet.

Scotland was voted the third-best country to go to next year in a list headed by Brazil, with Antarctica second.

Yorkshire came third in the list of top 10 world regions for 2014.

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Louise Redknapp admits she regrets not 'trying harder' to save her marriage to ex-husband Jamie and believes she 'f**ked things up'

Amanda Holden enjoys a family bike ride with daughters Lexi, 15, and Hollie, 9, as she's seen for the first time since making 215 mile

Lonely Planet's top destinations for 2014

Frances Cha, CNN • Updated 29th October 2013

1/10

Lower prices, fewer tourist numbers, the same incredible ancients sights that have been there for centuries. The Greek Islands in 2014 offer "remarkable value," says Lonely Planet in its Best in Travel 2014 rankings.

LOUISA GOULIAMAKI/AFP/GettyImages

(CNN) — Brazil, Antarctica and Scotland are the top three destinations to visit in 2014, according to Lonely Planet.

Ad אדם צעיר

THE TIMES OF ISRAEL

Immigrant Story: Dan

MAR 27, 2015, 12:59 PM

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Dan thinks his two young girls are happier here than in London. He only worries about their military service.

The peacemaker in the lion's den, Dan has always been a pacifist. When he was younger, he read Gandhi and Martin Luther King, and he used to stand on the street soliciting charity donations.

Now, he's a pacifist more for the sake of his children. When his girls reach 18, he hopes that there won't be a need for conscription.

Dream on, say the locals.

But Dan doesn't waver. Eventually Israelis will see that they cannot ignore 4.5 million Palestinians at their door step. That is not a dream.

When he moved to Israel in 2008, Dan met a lot of English-speaking immigrants. Most of them, he says, believed that they were returning to their homeland. They kissed the ground when they arrived. Usually though, after a year or two, they left. Dan met one Australian who made aliyah so that he could open his windows and smell the air here. Six months later he went back to Melbourne.

Dan's anecdote reminds me of an interview with Amos Oz in which he lists all the different dreams that Israel promised: the return of the Biblical period and the resurrection of the shtetls in Galicia, the spread of Viennese coffee houses and the establishment of a Marxist community that was also Tolstoy's utopia. 'After sixty years, Israel has a sense of disappointment precisely because it was born out of a dream. But it isn't disappointment about the nature of Israel as much as the nature of dreams.'

Dan didn't know what to expect when he first visited Israel in 2004 with his Israeli girlfriend, now his wife. He liked Tel Aviv. Despite the decrepit buildings, the city seemed more vibrant than London. The people he met drank less, they spoke their minds and they were genuinely interested in what others had to say. He saw a future for himself here.

Yet Dan has learned not discuss politics with Israelis. We just don't speak the same language, he says. And anyways you can't convince someone to change their mind.

Ironically, he first learned that lesson when he tried to reason with a zealous anti-Israeli protester in Brighton. He was still in his Gandhi phase back then.

But I'm not Gandhi, he says. I can only affect my life.

Dan Savery Raz is a journalist and writer, who co-authored the Lonely Planet Israel & the Palestinian Territories *guide book, and has since published two books:* The Last Stanza, *an anthology of Israeli poetry and* Dada is Zed, *a collection of short surrealist stories. All his work can be found at* http://danscribe.com/

THE END