



The Gaza Strip

רצועת עזה قطاع غزة

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Gaza in Numbers

- ➔ Total population: 1.81 million
- ➔ Estimated refugees in Gaza: 1.1 million
- ➔ Total area: 360 sq km
- ➔ Average age: 18 years
- ➔ Unemployment: 45%

Gaza throughout History

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

Introduction

Gaza has been off the to-do list for travellers for some time – and for good reason. Israel has blockaded the tiny strip from land, air and sea since just after Islamist party Hamas took control in 2006, keeping Gaza's 1.8 million residents in and, with the exception of a handful of journalists, politicians and aid workers, the world out. Even if it were possible to visit Gaza, it would not be recommended: Hamas fought three wars with Israel between 2006 and 2014 and the strip remains unstable and dangerous.

At 45km long and 10km wide, Gaza is one of the most densely populated places in the world – but it remains desperately poor, with hundreds of thousands of people living either in ramshackle refugee camps or heavily bombed towns and cities. It doesn't need to be this way: literacy levels are upwards of 97% and its seas hold untapped natural gas reserves worth up to US\$7 billion. Its historic sites go back three millennia and it is home to one of the most beautiful coastlines in the Mediterranean.

At the end of 2014, billions were pledged internationally to rebuild the strip, but it was difficult to see how any serious change could take place while the blockade continues and while many Palestinian militants remained committed to establishing a Palestine 'from the river to the sea' (the Jordan to the Mediterranean) – leaving little room for their Israeli neighbours.

Further Reading

- ➔ *Gaza, a History*, by Jean Pierre-Filiu (2014)
- ➔ *Footnotes in Gaza: a Graphic Novel*, by Joe Sacco (2010)
- ➔ *Gaza Writes Back: Short Stories from Young Writers in Gaza*, edited by Rafeef Alareer (2014)
- ➔ *The Book of Gaza: a City in Short Fiction (Reading the City)*, edited by Atef Abu Saif (2014)

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History

Commerce & 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 Kings 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 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.

Withdrawal & War

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