

The Dead Sea

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It's the ultimate Israeli cliché, the picture of the swim-suited bather lying in – almost on – the water, feet up and newspaper open, like a Sunday morning in bed. But this is one Middle Eastern cliché well worth indulging in. Floating in the Dead Sea is a sensation that cannot be duplicated anywhere else in the world.

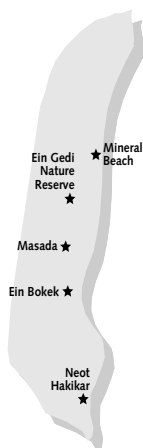
Beyond the obligatory float, soothing mud bath and soak in the sulphur, the approximately 65km-long shoreline is one of the most mythic places on earth. Believers say that Jesus was baptised where the Jordan River meets the Dead Sea. It's where the biblical cities of Sodom and Gomorrah are thought to have been located and it's where the Dead Sea Scrolls, the oldest copy of biblical texts, were found in a mountain cave. But the premier attraction is Masada, a solitary monolith rising from the desert and the fortress in which Jews martyred themselves and their families rather than become slaves of the Romans nearly 2000 years ago. This Unesco World Heritage site is one of Israel's most fabled locations and watching the sun rise over the Dead Sea from the ancient ruins at the top is an experience not to be missed.

Ein Gedi's nature reserves are excellent for beginner hikers, with their refreshing pools, endangered animals and antiquities. For adventure seekers there's a wide range of walking trails that offer stunning coastal views and the chance to explore the spectacular canyons of the Judean Desert.

After so much activity it's time to head south to Neot Hakikar, a remote desert moshav, and the perfect place to laze around for a few days at the lowest point on earth.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Finishing your holiday book while enjoying a long float in the Dead Sea at **Mineral Beach** (p331)
- Appreciating idyllic plunge pools after a sweaty hike through the **Ein Gedi Nature Reserve** (p332)
- Indulging in a sulphur soak and a soothing Dead Sea mud wrap at one of the many day spas at **Ein Bokek** (p337)
- Marching up the snake path to **Masada** (p336) before dawn, which leads to humbling views, incredible sunrises and a haunting history
- Taking on the Judean Desert – up hill, down wadi – by jeep from **Neot Hakikar** (p342)



History

Awareness of the Dead Sea's unique qualities goes back to at least the 4th century BC; luminaries such as Aristotle, Pliny and Galen all made mention of the sea's physical properties. The Nabataeans also knew a good thing when they saw it and collected the bitumen from the surface of the water and sold it to the Egyptians, who used it for embalming. Records show that this industry continued well into the Roman period.

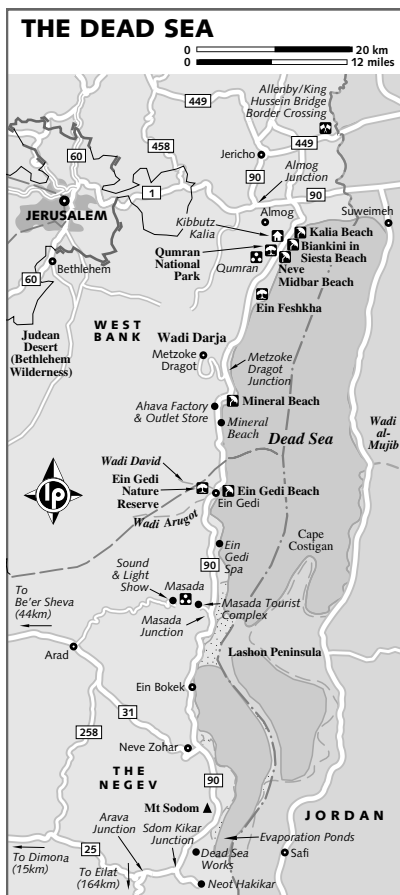
Despite scientific interest and small-scale commercial activity, the sea was largely regarded as an unhealthy thing (common wisdom had it that no bird could fly over its waters) and shunned. This made the area a favoured retreat of religious ascetics and political fugitives – the future King David, King Herod, Jesus and John the Baptist all took refuge along its shoreline, and in its mountains and caves.

Because of its 'Sea of the Devil' tag, the area remained desolate and untouched until it was finally explored by the US Navy in 1848. Still, it wasn't until the arrival of the British in Palestine that any real activity around the sea began. They set up two plants to tap the abundant mineral wealth and during the 1920s the Dead Sea provided half of the British Commonwealth's potash needs. One of the plants was destroyed in the 1948 Arab–Israeli War but the other, at Sodom, is still working.

The luxuries of modern roads and air-conditioned vehicles make it easy to overlook the fact that the region is a barren desert with an inhospitable climate. The heat and aridity, the recent environmental crisis, as well as political factors – half the area is in the Palestinian-controlled West Bank – have meant that other than in Ein Bokek, the Israelis have been slow to exploit the enormous potential here for money-spinning tourist and health facilities.

Geography

Known in Hebrew as Yam HaMelah (Sea of Salt), the Dead Sea is the world's lowest point, lying at 411m below sea level. The sea is approximately 65km long and 18km across at its widest point, although its water level fluctuates, dropping about 1m a year. After the 1948 War only about a quarter of the Dead Sea fell to the new State of Israel, but as a result of the Six Day War, almost



half of it is now under Israeli control, with the border between the West Bank and Jordan running virtually down the middle.

The Dead Sea is fed mainly by the Jordan River, and is supplemented by smaller rivers, underground springs and floods. With no outlet, the inflow is balanced by a high rate of evaporation caused by the hot climate. The water arrives with normal mineral concentrations (mainly magnesium, sodium, calcium and potassium chlorides), but evaporation causes the levels of minerals to rise dramatically. Ten times more salty than the ocean, the Dead Sea's salt concentration is about 30%, making it easy to sit up in and comfortably read this book (see *A Salty Tale*, p330). Contrary to