

Destination Israel & the Palestinian Territories

It's hard to believe that Israel, a country a little smaller than the state of New Jersey, along with the even tinier Palestinian Territories, has so often taken centre stage in world politics, religion and news headlines. But with Jerusalem at the region's disputed heart, the Golan Heights at its disputed head and Gaza dipping its disputed toe into the crystalline Mediterranean Sea, it's not difficult to see why.

A trip to Israel and the Palestinian Territories, whether you come for the spiritual, the political or the decidedly hedonistic, is a fast-paced ride that will undoubtedly challenge your preconceptions. In this beautiful, friendly, yet deeply troubled land, you can ponder the foundation stones of Christianity, the promised land of the Jews and some of the holiest places in all Islam. Bathe in three seas – the Med, the Dead and the Red – or do a spot of breaststroke in a fourth, where Jesus is said to have once walked on water. Hike mountain trails, shifting dunes, desert craters and windswept wadis. Marvel at ancient fortresses and consider contentious modern 'security walls.' Take to the ski slopes in the morning, and snorkel with dolphins in the afternoon.

Attractions aside, it's undeniable that the place and its people are characterised by a tragic, turbulent and complex history. Since Israel came officially into existence in 1948, peace in the Holy Land has proven as occasional an occurrence as it was throughout medieval and ancient history. Many Palestinians assert that Israel's creation, known to them as *al-Naqba* (the Catastrophe) has robbed them of their legally owned property, and, more importantly, of their historic homeland. Jewish Israelis, meanwhile, struggle with the legacy of their own mid-20th-century tragedy: the horrific WWII Holocaust, which saw the murder of millions of Jews at the hands of the Nazis. Both Israelis and Palestinians consider home, therefore, to be this tiny sliver of land at the heart of the Middle East, and as yet no one has been able to persuade them to live amicably together, or peaceably side-by-side.

That's not to say, however, that no one has tried. In 2002 former US president George W Bush outlined a 'Roadmap to peace', drawn up by an international quartet comprising the US, European Union, UN and Russia. The Roadmap envisaged a two-state solution, with an independent Palestinian state existing as a cordial next-door neighbour to Israel. The small print involved the Palestinian Territories renouncing the use of violence against Israel and embracing democratic reform; Israel, meanwhile, would recognise the Palestinian government and freeze ongoing Jewish settlement construction in the Palestinian Territories. Divided into three key phases, the plan was to have the whole thing settled – with final borders drawn up and hands shaken across the Arab world – as early as 2005.

But, as that canny Scot Robert Burns once said, 'The best laid schemes of mice and men, Gang aft a-gley'. Israeli and Palestinian leaders followed the Roadmap with about the accuracy of a reckless Middle Eastern driver. Though 2005 saw the dismantling of all Israeli settlements in the Gaza Strip under the supervision of former Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon,

FAST FACTS

Population: Israel 7.2 million (including 187,000 West Bank settlers), West Bank 2.5 million, Gaza 1.6 million

GDP growth (2008): Israel 3.9%, Palestinian Territories 0.8%

GDP per capita (2008): Israel US\$28,200, Palestinian Territories US\$2900

Israel's major exports: high-tech equipment, cut diamonds, fruit and vegetables

Unemployment rate (2008): Israel 6.1%, West Bank 16.3%, Gaza Strip 41.3%

Religion: Israel 76.4% Jewish, 16% Muslim, 2.1% Christian, 1.6% Druze, 3.9% unspecified; West Bank 75% Muslim, 17% Jewish (Israeli settlers), 8% Christian and other; Gaza Strip 99.3% Muslim, 0.7% Christian

Tourists to Israel in 2008: about 2.8 million

Israel's air force: the world's fourth largest (after the USA, Russia and China)

Israel's business world: boasts the highest number of companies on the New York Stock Exchange, after the USA and Canada

Lowest spot on earth: Dead Sea (400m below sea level and dropping)

settlement construction within the West Bank carried on and the death toll from Israeli army operations and Palestinian terror attacks continued to mount. Just a year after the Gaza disengagement, Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit was captured by Palestinian militants, and three days later Israel Defence Forces (IDF) launched 'Operation Summer Rain', which left hundreds of Gazans dead.

And the struggles in Gaza did not end there. In 2007 Hamas paramilitary forcibly ejected political rival Fatah from security and civil service positions. The fierce subsequent infighting has led some international onlookers to question whether Palestinians are capable of creating the united front necessary for independent statehood. Meanwhile, many West Bank Palestinians have watched with horror as events have unfolded in Gaza, and felt a cultural gap between the two communities steadily emerge.

But Gaza is just one element of a picture composed of infinite shades of grey. Though the Jewish Israeli-Muslim Palestinian conflict is a world headline favourite, it's crucial to remember that numerous other communities also exist in both places. Take, for example, the Israeli Arabs – pre-1948 Palestinians by another name – who, for one reason or another, remained after the creation of the Israeli state. These Muslim and Christian people have a complex legacy, pitting their allegiance to their homes in Israel against their allegiance to their Palestinian families or Muslim brethren.

Then there are the Palestinian Christians who inhabit Ramallah and Bethlehem and the surrounding area, and who frequently feel little allegiance to either Fatah or Hamas: many instead have chosen to emigrate to safer climes such as Scandinavia, Canada or elsewhere. There are also Bedouin Muslims, inheritors of a fast-disappearing nomadic lifestyle, whose semi-permanent desert homes often fall prey to demolition orders from Israel; and smaller, unique communities of Samaritans, African Hebrew Israelites, African Muslims and Circassians, each with their own specific set of beliefs, priorities and customs. In addition, there are the mountain-dwelling Druze – whose religion is a sort of mystic combination of Islam and Christianity – and, in Jerusalem and around, are Armenian, Coptic and Greek monks, nuns and permanent pilgrims galore.

It's this heady mix, alongside the region's more obvious historic and religious attractions, which makes Israel and the Palestinian Territories such a bewitching destination. Hike, sunbathe, shop, gaze and dine your way about the region, by all means, but, most importantly, talk to the people behind the attractions, tragedies and headlines. Strike up conversations with Orthodox Jews and Israeli Arabs, with Russian and Ethiopian immigrants and with unconventional, unreligious urbanites. Take time to meet the children of refugee camps and the teenage soldiers, and the peace activists and protest groups who people this complex and beleaguered landscape. It's by far the best way to glean an inkling of the truth lurking behind the persuasive propaganda, and to discover for yourself why Israel and the Palestinian Territories' complicated, volatile but intoxicating reputation far outstrips its geographical size.

Getting Started

Sometimes fun, sometimes fraught, sometimes frustrating but always fascinating. If you arrive with an open mind, travel within Israel and the Palestinian Territories is likely to be some of the most rewarding and illuminating you'll ever undertake. With a varied but generally temperate climate and a calendar full of celebrations – Muslim, Jewish and Christian alike – any time here is a good time to travel. Even during the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan, when the daylight Palestinian pace might be slow, the nights are filled with festivities and feasting.

Your grandma might blanch at the notion of you tripping lightly through Jerusalem or across the West Bank, whose names only too easily conjure images of violence, bombing and bloodshed. But Israel and the Palestinian Territories are actually largely safe, secure destinations with an abundance of friendly locals willing and able to help you out. Pick up a couple of *shaloms* (hellos) and *shukrans* (thank yous) along the way and your encounters with the region's inhabitants will be even smoother. Keep an eye on the news and on government travel warnings, of course, but don't be put off by the negative press. After a breakfast in beautiful Bethlehem or a night camping beneath the stars in the depths of the Negev desert, it will no longer be the images flashed up on Breaking News that first come to mind when someone mentions this captivating region.

WHEN TO GO

Israel and the Palestinian Territories are open for all seasons, but the best time to go depends on what you're planning to do when you get there. For hiking the mountains or the desert, the best time to visit is in the spring (April and May) when temperatures are mild, days are sunny and winter rains have turned the hills and pastures green and flower-flecked. Autumn (late September and October), after the departure of the searing summer heat, also makes a good time to arrive for a less-swelting encounter with the hills or desert. November to March brings rain and chillier climes, particularly away from the coastal strip. But, with Christmas and Hanukkah both on the agenda, the festive spirit more than makes up for the need for an umbrella or a thick coat. From November to February, you might also catch some snow in the far north – good for a spot of Middle Eastern skiing or a snowballing contest on Mount Hermon (p290).

The summer, extending from June to late September, is the best time to arrive if you're a fan of scorching heat, beachside frolicking or a tanning top-up. Hotel and car-rental prices tend to rise during this period throughout Israel, as French and Russian holidayers hit the beaches in droves. But festivals abound, and there's an easy (if rarely breezy) summer spirit in the air.

Prices rise, as well, throughout Israel during religious holidays, and at Christmas and Easter in Bethlehem. It's also important to account for closing times and reduced public transport during some holidays, particularly Yom Kippur (see p413 for details); and the fact that during the Muslim fasting period, Ramadan (which usually falls in October), it's impolite to eat, drink or smoke in public during daylight hours in much of the Palestinian Territories (other than Christian centres such as Bethlehem and Ramallah) and East Jerusalem.

See climate charts (p409) for more information.

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- A decent pair of shoes for hiking, and something slick for smoothing your entry into a swanky Tel Aviv bar
- All the holiday reading you'll need: imported English-language books (including our own guidebooks) are prohibitively expensive in Israel
- Keeping in mind how travel to Israel might affect your other travel plans within the Middle East (see p422)
- Making sure your passport will be valid for at least six months after your date of arrival
- A driving licence if you intend to rent a car, and a Professional Association of Diving Instructors (PADI) certificate for diving in Sinai or Eilat
- Organising a voluntary work placement if you're planning on getting involved (see p419 and the boxed text, p301)
- Keeping a close check on the news and latest travel advisory warnings

COSTS & MONEY

Life in Israel doesn't come cheap, and the costs of restaurants, hotels, transport and car hire are roughly equivalent to their prices in the Western world. Backpackers can expect to spend, on average, between US\$20 (75NIS) and US\$40 (150NIS) per person per day, with about half of that going towards accommodation. To make the most of your money, consider travelling by local bus as much as possible, look into the possibilities of homestays, and remember that costs of travel in the West Bank are considerably cheaper, in general, than travel in Israel.

For a little more comfort, in a midrange hotel and meals other than the snack-food staples of felafel and *shwarma*, your per-person budget will easily be upped to between US\$50 (185NIS) and US\$100 (375NIS) per day, or slightly more if you don't have someone to share a room with. To live comfortably at the top end of the travel spectrum, staying in comfortable hotels or intimate B&Bs, dining at a good selection of restaurants and renting a car, you can expect to spend US\$100 (375NIS) to US\$180 (675NIS) per day, or as much more as your credit card will allow.

HOW MUCH?

Newspaper 12NIS

Short taxi hop 30NIS

Main course in a mid-range restaurant 40NIS

Internet cafe use per hour 15NIS

Museum admission 25-40NIS

TRAVELLING RESPONSIBLY

Responsible travel in Israel and the Palestinian Territories encompasses a wide range of factors, from arriving with a tolerant and open mind to the cacophony of political and religious viewpoints you'll come across, to attempting to reduce your impact on an often severely strained environment.

Israel and the Palestinian Territories' environment has, over the last few decades, faced many of the challenges that modernity has imposed on other parts of the world. High-rises throng and threaten the delicate ecosystem of the coastal strip; the waters of the Dead Sea are receding at an alarming pace (see p82 and the boxed text, p340); sewage blights the seas, rivers and streams; and there are shamefully few recycling programs to deal with the mountains of reusable rubbish thrown out each year.

Culturally, too, Israel and the Palestinian Territories' populations are sorely challenged: Israel's Bedouin population provides a vivid example of a millennia-old culture rapidly being lost forever; while traditional Palestinian cultural pursuits such as theatre performances, dances and folk festivals, in both Gaza and the West Bank, have been severely curtailed in recent years by travel restrictions and curfews, thus being lost to a new generation. In Gaza, in particular, cultural activities have increasingly

been constrained by hard-line authorities that restrict dancing, musical and other events at which men and women might mingle, on religious grounds.

One good starting point for responsible travel in the region is to explore the options presented in our GreenDex (p1), which lists organisations, businesses, hotels and restaurants committed to making some sort of positive contribution to responsible travel, either by recycling, creating artisan cooperatives, using locally sourced or organic ingredients, helping locals in need or keeping alive the cultural heritage of the region. Also consult the Environment chapter (p79) for a list of resources working towards various aspects of environmental protection. Don't miss out, too, on **Green Prophet** (www.greenprophet.org), which posts the latest responsible-travel and environmentally themed news from Israel and the wider Middle East.

TRAVEL LITERATURE

There's a wealth of textbook accounts of Israeli and Palestinian politics, but for some non-fiction and travel writing, the following selection should serve you well.

The *grande dame* of travel literature about the Holy Land, without whose sharp humour no visit is complete, is Mark Twain's *The Innocents Abroad* (1871), perfect for points of comparison between the region then and now. Another classic is Thomas Friedman's *From Beirut to Jerusalem* (1989), a compelling memoir of the journalist's time in Israel and Lebanon.

More recently, English author Susan Nathan wrote *The Other Side of Israel* (2005), which chronicles her move from Tel Aviv to an Arab town east of Haifa, where she was a sole Jew among 25,000 Arabs. Also tugging on your heart strings is *If a Place Can Make You Cry* (2002), a compilation of emails and letters sent by author Daniel Gordis to friends and family in the USA following his move to Jerusalem with his family.

A set of stories commingled with politics can be found in *Elvis in Jerusalem* (2002) written by long-time *Ha'aretz* columnist Tom Segev, while *This Heated Place: Encounters in the Promised Land* (2004), by Deborah

TOP TIPS FOR RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL

- Order tap water in restaurants instead of plastic-bottle-heavy mineral water, and carry tap water with you in a refillable bottle when out and about.
- Share a car with fellow travellers if you're heading to areas without decent public transport – it's not only greener, but also brings down your travel costs.
- Adhere to dress codes if you're visiting religious institutions. Generally, female heads should be covered in mosques and synagogues; everywhere, including churches, expects long sleeves and covered legs for all.
- Support those who support the environment – choose accommodation that's implementing ecofriendly approaches to waste management, and organisations helping to protect the region's open spaces and waters.
- Spread the wealth: eat at local restaurants as well as tourist-oriented get ups; don't stick solely to this guidebook's recommendations – you'll find your own priceless hidden gems.
- Consider buying souvenirs from cooperatives, family-run enterprises or charity concerns.
- Always ask before taking photographs of locals, and stay alert to subtle variations in local cultural habits.

TOP 10

Egypt

ISRAEL & THE PALESTINIAN TERRITORIES

Jordan

HIDDEN TREASURES

Head off the beaten track to one of these lesser-visited gems.

- 1 Mar Saba monastery: A desert delight near Bethlehem (p312)
- 2 Hebron's Old City: A sad yet stunning sight (p320)
- 3 Peqi'in: A Druze village between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea (p243)
- 4 Florentine: Home to Tel Aviv's newest and coolest designers and their wares (p182)
- 5 Moshav Amirim: Vegetarian bliss high up in the hills (p281)
- 6 Gaza City: An unforgettable experience, if you make it in through the gates (p376)
- 7 The Arava: A desert filled with vast, unvisited vistas (p363)
- 8 Sunday Armenian Mass at St James' Cathedral, Jerusalem (p116)
- 9 Sunset strolling through Tsfat's ancient cemetery (p276)
- 10 Jericho's little-visited ancient remains, including Hisham's Palace (p319)

NATURAL WONDERS

Not all the Holy Land's wonders are of 'the ancient world' variety; indeed, some are far, far older. Get your hiking boots and binoculars at the ready to explore some of nature's own wonders.

- 1 Wadi Qelt: Hike past the centuries-old rock-cut St George's Monastery (p319)
- 2 Sorek Caves: Distinguish your stalactites from your stalagmites (p164)
- 3 Sea of Galilee: Camp, dip or admire the age-old vistas (p263)
- 4 Hula Valley: Bird-spotting with a few water buffalo thrown in for good measure (p285)
- 5 Yehudiya Nature Reserve: Challenging hikes and icy river swims (p294)
- 6 Baniyas Nature Reserve: Gushing streams and waterfalls, best seen in early spring (p289)
- 7 The Dead Sea: Nature's original briny bath (p326)
- 8 Maktesh Ramon: An immense craterlike canyon in stunning pastel shades (p358)
- 9 Sinai: Lunar landscapes and vivid underwater worlds (p393)
- 10 Nakhal Gishron: Stunning hiking outside the bright lights of Eilat (p373)

WAYS TO MEET THE LOCALS

Get to grips with the region's complex culture by meeting locals at one of the following options.

- 1 Dance to the drumming on Drummers Beach (p185) on Friday at sunset
- 2 Join the devout in prayer at the Western Wall (p104) or at one of the city's many churches or mosques
- 3 Share Shabbat (p103) dinner with a family in Jerusalem or Tsfat
- 4 Shop with the locals for picnic supplies or dinner ingredients at Bethlehem's cute little souq (market; p305)
- 5 Get your hands dirty at an environmentally slanted kibbutz (p85)
- 6 Understand Bedouin life at the Museum of Bedouin Culture (p352) outside Be'er Sheva
- 7 Stroll along Yefet St, Jaffa (p201), stopping to eat *masabacha* or puff on a *nargileh*
- 8 Volunteer your time at one of the West Bank's many charitable causes (p301 and p419)
- 9 Join local artists and musicians for a night out at Al-Kasaba Theater & Cinematheque (p315) in Ramallah
- 10 Folk dance the night away at Jerusalem's International Cultural Centre for Youth (p158)

Campbell, offers a variety of perspectives on the region, as the author encounters gay Tel Avivans, West Bank settlers and Gazan schoolgirls.

For more-academic reads, dip into Robert Fisk's sweeping Middle Eastern overview, *The Great War for Civilisation: The Conquest of the Middle East* (2007), or *The Iron Cage: The Story of the Palestinian Struggle for Statehood* (2007), by noted historian Rashid Khaliki.

Finally, an insight into the lives of everyday Palestinians (and their zoo animals) is offered by Amelia Thomas, coordinating author of this book, in *The Zoo on the Road to Nablus* (2008). Telling the true story of the last Palestinian zoo and the only – and indomitable – Palestinian zoo vet and his motley crew of staff and animals, it's an illuminating glimpse into the tragi-comic world of the West Bank. (See the boxed text, p323 for more on the zoo and its inhabitants.)

INTERNET RESOURCES

Debka Files (www.debka.com) An Israeli political-analysis site, essential reading for lovers of conspiracy theories, with a good dash of news and commentary thrown in.

EnglishPAL (www.englishpal.ps) A terrific Palestinian website with an extensive 'What's On' section, classifieds, an advice forum and more.

Haaretz (www.haaretz.com) Up-to-the-minute news in English from one of Israel's major newspapers.

Israel Ministry of Tourism (www.goisrael.com) A useful tourist-board website that includes upcoming events, background and a virtual tour of the country.

LonelyPlanet.com (www.lonelyplanet.com) Lonely Planet's website contains dedicated pages for both Israel and the Palestinian Territories. There are travel tips, photos and the ever-useful Thorn Tree online forum.

This Week in Palestine (www.thisweekinpalestine.com) A frequently updated source of information on Palestinian exhibitions, theatre performances, and other cultural goings-on.

Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

BRIGHT LIGHTS, BIG CITIES **Two Weeks / Jerusalem And Back Again**

With a fortnight to spare, you can see the major metropolises of both Israel and the Palestinian Territories, throwing in some historic city exploration en route. Spend your first two days in **Jerusalem** (p87), then two days exploring in and around **Bethlehem** (p302), with a half-day or evening jaunt to **Ramallah** (p312) for theatre, restaurants or cocktails. Break out your wide-brimmed hat and sun block for a full-day trip to the **Dead Sea** (p326) and up to ancient **Masada** (p335). Back via Jerusalem, head to the coast for a couple of days around **Tel Aviv** (p167) and **Jaffa** (p201), with enough time for plenty of shopping, bar-hopping, fine dining and lounging on the beach. Next, head up the coast for a glance at Herod's historic **Caesarea** (p230) before pushing on to **Haifa** (p211). Make sure to see the Baha'i Gardens (p215) before a day trip to **Akko** (p235) and **Rosh HaNikra** (p243). From Haifa, drive east to **Tiberias** (p256) via **Nazareth** (p245) for a day exploring the shores of the **Sea of Galilee** (p263). Finish off with a trip back to Jerusalem along the beautiful Jordan Valley, breaking the journey to examine the ruins at **Beit She'an** (p253).

With two weeks, you've time to explore all the must-see hotspots and highlights, including Masada, Jerusalem, the Dead Sea and the Sea of Galilee. Everything along this 280km route is easily accessible by rental car, public transport or, if you're in the mood for pedal power, bicycle.



AN ISRAELI ODYSSEY

Three to four weeks / Jerusalem to Petra

After a few days in and around **Jerusalem** (p87), spend time in **Bethlehem** (p302) and **Ramallah** (p312), take a day trip down to the wondrous caves at **Beit Guvrin** (p166), stopping at a winery or two on the way. Next, stir it up in **Tel Aviv** (p167), wander historic **Jaffa** (p201), then head north to **Haifa** (p211) to encounter Baha'i culture and northern soul. From Haifa, visit the quaint town of **Zichron Ya'acov** (p229), famed for its local wines. Along with beautiful, seaside **Akko** (p235) and subterranean **Rosh HaNikra** (p243), visit the Druze villages of **Daliyat al-Karmel** (p227) and **Peqi'in** (p243). Head inland for a day exploring chaotic **Nazareth** (p245), and then up north for a couple days of relaxation around the **Sea of Galilee** (p263). It's well worth hiring a car to experience the spectacular sights in the Golan Heights, including **Nimrod Castle** (p289) and the waterfall-filled **Banias Nature Reserve** (p289). **Tsfat** (p272) and **Rosh Pina** (p283) are two quaint, cobbled and unmissable highlights in the area. Having conquered the north, head down the Jordan Valley, stopping at **Beit She'an** (p253) and bleak Palestinian **Jericho** (p316), before spending a starlit night near the shores of the **Dead Sea** (p326). Rise early the following day to catch the sunrise from magnificent **Masada** (p335). From the Dead Sea, delve into the Negev desert for a day or two around **Mitzpe Ramon** (p357) and clamber down into the enormous **Maktesh Ramon** (p358). The next stop is a spot of sea and sun at **Eilat** (p365). From here, push on east with a trip to awe-inspiring **Petra** (p384) in Jordan; plan on two days or more if you're keen to do some hiking in the area.



Small but perfectly formed, it's possible with a month in your pocket to visit all Israel's main sights, with a foray into Jordan to boot. Make this 700km route your own by allowing for extra time in the Negev, hiking in Petra or night-life in Tel Aviv as your sensibilities dictate.

ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

WELCOME TO THE WEST BANK One week / East Jerusalem to Hebron

The West Bank offers eye-opening adventures aplenty. Admire the idyllic, timeless vistas of olive orchards, endless skies and gently rolling hills; visit ancient cities and sites straight out of the Bible; or consider the more modern tensions of the West Bank on a day trip to a Jewish settlement and/or a Palestinian refugee camp; see p431 for some ready-made options.

Start at East Jerusalem's Arab bus station. Catch a *sherut* to the **Qalandia checkpoint** (p161) and then a cab into **Ramallah** (p312). There, drop in at **Al-Muqata** (p313), the Palestinian Authority HQ and last resting place of Yasser Arafat; spend the afternoon sipping coffee and clacking backgammon tiles, then get ready for a night out on a different kind of tiles. The next day, try the hair of the dog at the Middle East's best microbrewery in **Taybeh** (p316) or go studious with a visit to **Birzeit University** (p410), returning to Ramallah to catch a concert or theatre performance at one of the city's many arts venues. Next, head up to **Nablus** (p323) for a day lost in an enchanting market set between stone mansions. Scrub up at an ancient hammam, then feed a baboon in **Qalqilya** (p323) at the last Palestinian zoo. From Nablus, head to the Jordan River valley and down to **Jericho** (p316) for some extraordinary hiking through **Wadi Qelt** (p319). Then slip southward to beautiful **Bethlehem** (p302), famed as the birthplace of Jesus. After exploring its winding lanes, head out to historic **Herodium** (p311), get your groove on at **Cosmos** (p309), the only Palestinian nightclub, before taking a ride down to the West Bank's hidden gem: the troubled, but tremendous, city of **Hebron** (p320).

The West Bank richly rewards those who venture along its highways and byways. The area covered by this 150km route offers idyllic rural landscapes, places of biblical importance, and a wholehearted hospitality that's impossible to resist.



TAILORED TRIPS

HIKE, SWIM, PLAY

If you'd rather hike to a hilltop than doze in a deckchair, there's plenty to keep you busy. Starting in the south, scuba dive or snorkel to your heart's content in **Eilat** (p365), or **Dahab** (p399) in Egypt. The area also has some great hikes, including the walk to the top of **Mt Sinai** (p404) or through **Nakhal Gishron** (p373), back in Israel. It's easy, too, to spend a week exploring the boulders, cliffs and ancient buildings of **Petra** (p384), in Jordan. Heading into the Negev desert, adventurers will delight in **Mitzpe Ramon** (p357), where you can do everything from abseiling to 4WD trips in the desert. In the Dead Sea region, go for a leisurely walk through **Ein Avdat National Park** (p355), climb to the top of **Masada** (p335) for the sunrise, explore **Ein Gedi Nature Reserve** (p332) and hike to St George's Monastery in **Wadi Qelt** (p319). Activities along the coast include swimming and kite-boarding off the beaches in **Tel Aviv** (p185), horse riding near **Netanya** (p206) and scuba diving over the ruins of King Herod's port in **Caesarea** (p230).

Heading far north, cycle around the **Sea of Galilee** (p263) and hike the magnificent **Banias Nature Reserve** (p289). If it's summer, try kayaking on the **Jordan River** (see p295) or, in winter, summon a pair of skis and swoosh down **Mt Hermon** (p290).



IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF PROPHETS

Even travellers without a religious bone in their body can't help but be intrigued by the holy vibes of Israel and the Palestinian Territories. **Jerusalem** (p87) is, of course, the crown jewel for religious travellers and you could spend days visiting sites holy to Christianity, Judaism and Islam. Having been thoroughly infected by Jerusalem syndrome, take a trip over to friendly, engaging **Bethlehem** (p302), said to be the birthplace of Christ. Continuing south, **Hebron** (p320) contains one of the most sacred sites in the country: the Cave of Machpelah is holy to Jews, Muslims and Christians and is believed to be the burial place of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and their wives. Elijah the prophet made his mark in northern Israel, and in **Haifa** (p211) you can see the cave in which he hid from King Ahab. The city is also the headquarters of the Baha'i faith and the Baha'i Gardens have become a requisite stop for people of all faiths. Inland, doomsdayers might want to visit **Megiddo** (p234), the place that the Bible cites as the stage of the last great battle on earth. Not far away is **Nazareth** (p245), the boyhood stomping ground of Jesus. Further north, **Tsfat** (p272) is the centre of the Kabbalah, traditional Jewish mysticism. And, just up the road, you'll find the **Sea of Galilee** (p263) where Jesus is said to have worked his walk-on-water miracle.



HEDONISTIC PLEASURES

Don't be surprised to come home from your trip having put on a few pounds. Israel is a hedonist's delight, with all manner of gourmet restaurants and spas to pander to your every whim. The sulphurous-smelling Dead Sea may not seem the obvious place to begin a hedonistic holiday, but the area is in fact recognised as the country's premier spa destination. Most of the spa resorts are located at **Ein Bokek** (p337), though if you simply want to lather yourself up with mud and float in the sea, try the beach at **Ein Gedi** (p331). Up north, taste the good life with a wine tour in the **Upper Galilee** (p284). Amazingly, Israelis have even managed to grow grapes in the desert, bringing a small wine industry to the Negev; try the **Sde Boker Winery** (p347). While you explore the country hedonistically, it's only right that you'd bunk down in the very best abodes. Most boutique hotels and four- or five-star hotels have spa and massage services; try the **Hotel Mizpe Hayamim** (p283) in Rosh Pina, or one of the super-swish zimmers on offer in **Ramot** (p295). And finally, don't forget the food. **Tel Aviv** (p190) tops the list with dozens of gourmet eateries. Take your pick from a plethora of fine-dining affairs, in chic, minimalist and fancy formulas aplenty. Don't, however, forget the humble hummus: nearby **Jaffa** (p204) is home to one of the very best bowls of chickpea heaven in the entire country, if not the world.



The Authors



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Food & Drink, Tel Aviv, West Bank, The Gaza Strip, Directory, Transport**

Amelia worked as a journalist in Israel and the Palestinian Territories for five years, covering everything from Palestinian acrobats to armed settler hole-ins. She has worked on over a dozen books for Lonely Planet, including *Lebanon*, *India* and *Travel with Children*, and is a strong contender for the company record for the most time on the road while pregnant: her four under-5s accompany her (both before and after birth) on most of her research trips, including forays into Gaza and South Lebanon. Her book *The Zoo on the Road to Nablus* tells the true story of the last Palestinian zoo; she is currently hard at work on *Principal Wigwam*, her next book.



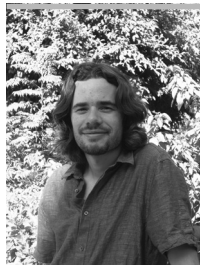
MICHAEL KOHN **Jerusalem, Haifa & the North Coast**

A journalist by profession and a traveller by nature, Michael has been churning out news articles and guidebooks from the far corners of the globe. He first visited Israel in 1987 as a student and returned years later to update Lonely Planet's *Middle East* guide. He has since worked on the past two editions of *Israel & the Palestinian Territories*, covering Jerusalem, Haifa and everything in between. Michael works on a number of other Lonely Planet titles, including *China*, *Russia* and *Mongolia*, and freelances for BBC World Service and AFP. When not on a reporting trip he is at home in San Francisco with his family, Baigal and Molly. He can be found online at: www.michaelkohn.us.



MIRIAM RAPHAEL **The Galilee, The Upper Galilee & the Golan,
The Dead Sea**

As a university student Miriam lived in Jerusalem working as an intern for JPost Radio and a stringer for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. When she wasn't covering Palestinian hip-hop gigs, teenage *refuseniks* and the young settler movement, she would sneak off to the Red Sea for diving, the Negev for hiking and as many music festivals as she had new shekels. Between Lonely Planet gigs she indulged her passion for the Middle East with trips to Syria, Iran, Jordan and Egypt. After several years working on the Lonely Planet website she is now living in the Australian outback. This is her second time updating the *Israel & the Palestinian Territories* guide.

**DAN SAVERY RAZ****The Negev, Petra (Jordan), Sinai (Egypt)**

Born in England, Dan completed a media degree, backpacked in Southeast Asia and Central America, and spent time fundraising on the streets of London before training on magazines like the *Big Issue*. He spent much of the past decade travelling around Europe and North America for Channel 4's *A Place in the Sun* magazine. Since then, Dan has moved to Israel, where he has developed a taste for Iraqi home cooking. For his Lonely Planet debut, Dan found himself driving through the Negev, listening to Bob Dylan and sleeping with llamas. He now lives in cosmopolitan Tel Aviv, where he writes newspaper articles and surreal stories, and organises poetry nights in a bar; for details see www.danscribe.com.

CONTRIBUTING AUTHORS

Matt Beynon Rees wrote the History chapter. Matt has covered the Middle East as a journalist for over a decade, including as *Time* magazine's Jerusalem bureau chief. He published a nonfiction account of Israeli and Palestinian societies called *Cain's Field: Faith, Fratricide, and Fear in the Middle East* and is the author of a prize-winning series of Palestinian crime novels featuring Bethlehem detective Omar Yussef.

Professor Alon Tal wrote the Environment chapter. He founded the Israel Union for Environmental Defense and the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies, and has served as chair of Life and Environment, Israel's umbrella group for green organisations. Professor of the Desert Ecology Department at Ben-Gurion University, he heads the Jewish National Fund's sustainable development committee and still finds time to hike and bike around Israel with his wife and daughters.

LONELY PLANET AUTHORS

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